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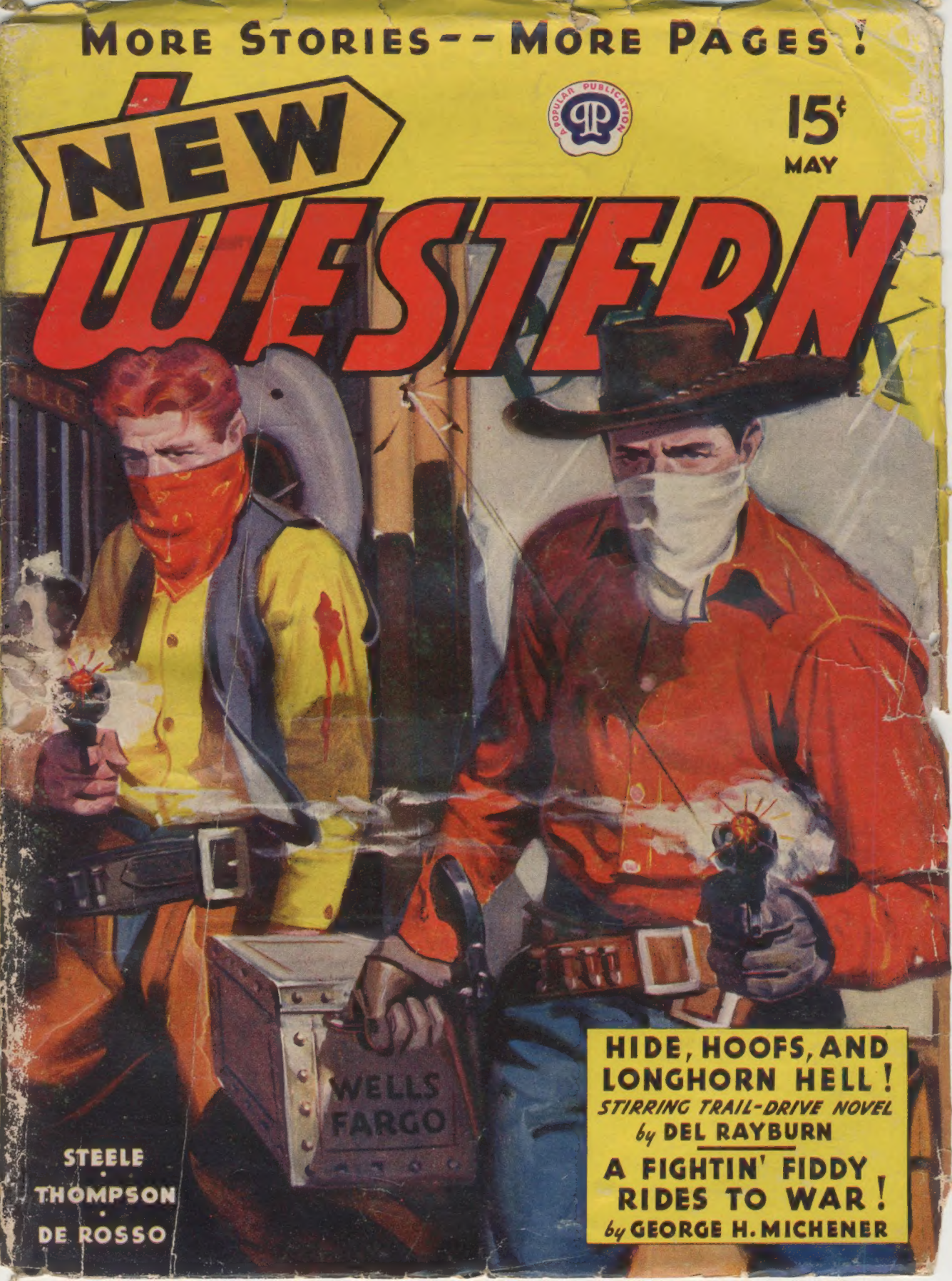

HIDE, HOOFS, AND LONGHORN HELL!
STIRRING TRAIL-DRIVE NOVEL
by DEL RAYBURN

A FIGHTIN' FIDDY RIDES TO WAR!
by GEORGE H. MICHENER

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Vol. 7 MAY, 1944 No. 4

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NEXT ISSUE
PUBLISHED APRIL 26TH!

Published bi-monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a division of Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Entered as second class matter January 9, 1941, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright 1944 by Fictioneers, Inc. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. All rights reserved under Pan American copyright convention. Single copy price 15c. Six-issue subscription in the U.S.A. 90c. Additional foreign postage 38c. Printed in the U.S.A.

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THE STRAWBOSS

FEW people today realize that the West was built, not by the main stream of migration which surged across the plains from the Eastern states, but by a second, northward stream up from the Border country—from Texas. It was the hardy, adventurous Texicans, seeking a market for their herds, who overran the frontier, made it their own, and left the indelible stamp of cattle upon it.

We owe much to the courage and resourcefulness of those early Texans—and every day of this all-out war teaches us that the strain has not died out. Wherever Americans are fighting for freedom, there you'll find Texas' sons—thinking faster, battling harder, giving more to the fight than the enemy.

Take Captain Jalvin Newall, for instance. Or take Lieutenant Richard Burrage, or Major David Frazier. The three of them, Texans all, were in the battle for Mount Samucro in Italy.

Newall, of Huntsville, Texas, was with an advanced unit on Samucro peak. His men were working down the slope toward a lesser mountain on the left, when mortar fire from the Germans beyond began to get heavy. Just when things were looking pretty bad, a shell knocked out his telephone line to the battalion command. He was left with no means of communication but the radio, and he didn't want to risk giving information to the enemy.

So he called Lieut. Burrage, of Waco. "Dick," he said, "get this straight. I started to the post office to deliver mail, and ran smack into the roughest road you ever saw."

"What's that again?" Burrage wanted to know, and went into a huddle with Major Frazier, of Houston. Together they figured out that Newall meant he had started for his objective and run into serious trouble.

"Got it. Go ahead," Burrage called back.

"I don't know whether to leave the mail on the road or bring it back," Newall went on. "Maybe you'd better notify the postmaster."

Burrage and Frazier took this one apart and decided that Newall wanted to know whether he should leave his men in position or withdraw them—was asking for a decision from the commanding officer.

"I've been down to see Jerry Sadler," said Newall then. "I found thirty-seven letters from Abel, fifty-two from Baker and forty-three from Charles. I got the solitaire grease and I'm afraid when the sun comes up it'll melt. I'd like to get it back to the kitchen before it spoils."

That was a little tougher, especially the part about Jerry Sadler, who is a well-known figure in Texas. But finally the two of them doped it out.

Newall was telling them he had seen Jerries in the saddle of the mountain, but the strength of the A-B-C companies was so low he was afraid when the sun dissolved the mists off the mountain, the Germans might open up and inflict heavy casualties.

Newall thought perhaps he had better bring his men back to the crest of Samucro before the Germans got the range.

His decoded messages were relayed to the commanding officer, and the order went back, "Leave the mail on the road. Do not bring it back."

So Newall and his men "left the mail on the road"—held their dangerous position for two days in order to beat off a counterattack and hold the post that had been won. And Texas double-talk had been a good substitute for secret code, under the pressure of a quick-thinking Western brain!

Those three Texans would have been right at home with Uncle Billy McClain, the tough old trail boss in Del Rayburn's *Hides, Hoofs, And Longhorn Hell!* which leads off this issue. When Uncle Billy finally fought his way into War Horse range with a starving, trail-weary herd, he found there was only one way to get out again—by bucking the meanest town-full of hardcase landgrabbers that ever burned powdersmoke!

That novel by Rayburn, incidentally, is bonus reading—an extra hunk of action-packed Western fiction, from us to you. A shift in our paper consumption has enabled us to make *New Western* bigger and better than ever before—114 pages instead of 98. That means we can include a good 10,000 words more of thrills and adventure in each issue—and Del Rayburn's story is only a sample of the kind of swift frontier novels we have in store.

Watch for a great novel by one of your favorite Western writers, in the July issue—it'll be on sale April 26th!

THE EDITOR.

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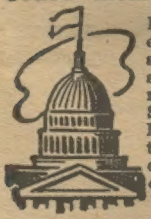

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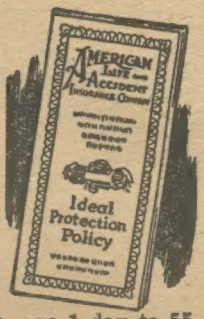

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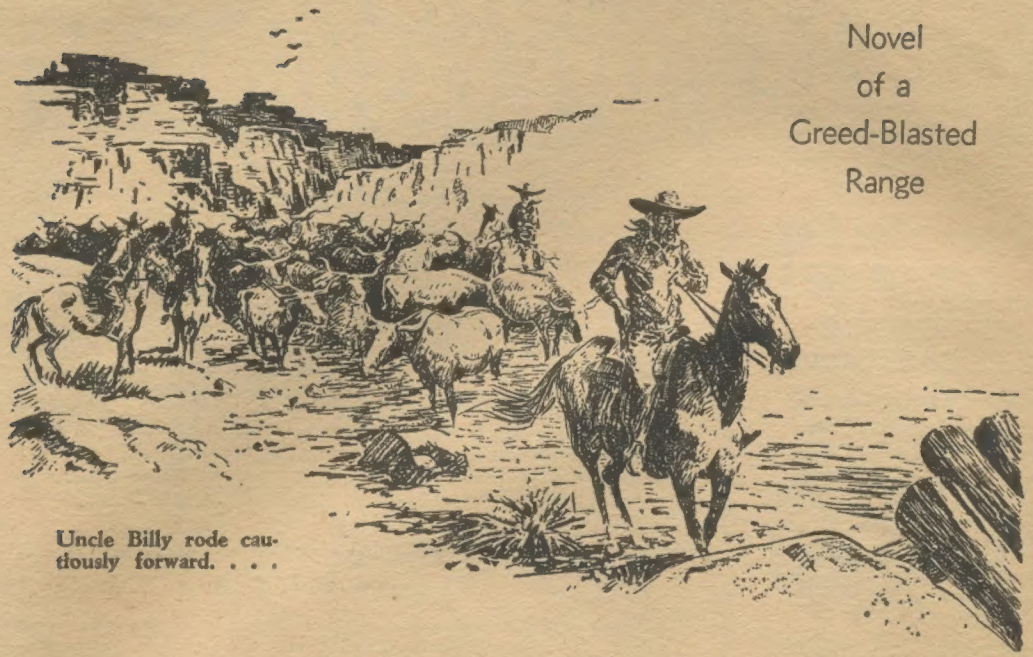
Novel of a Greed-Blasted Range



Uncle Billy rode cautiously forward. . . .

When Ace Lemiky and his greedy killer crew invaded the mighty War Horse range, Uncle Billy McClain, Texican, took a hand in their deadly game of draw—with bullets for chips, and a life for every card!

CHAPTER ONE

Hot-Lead Welcome

UNCLE BILLY McCLAIN was no sailor — he wasn't bow-legged enough, having spent only thirty-eight of his forty years forking saddle leather—but just the same a blood-red sky meant a spell of nasty weather when it came with a rising sun.

"Ring their tails a little and tell 'em they're almost home," he told the boys pushing the drag. "I'm riding on ahead to see if there really is a Ute Park at the head of this danged canyon. I'm ready to turn these cows over to that Cap Griffin's War Horse outfit any time now."

Trail-boss McClain was a little mad, deep inside where no other man could see it, as he pushed along past the herd of young cows strung out for fifteen miles up the narrow canyon. Many of the heifers had their first calves running at their flanks. They needed good feed to keep their milk up, or those calves wouldn't last long.

Now the calves were all showing a lack of nourishment. Instead of cavorting and playing in and out of the herd, they hung listlessly beside their mothers, bawling hungrily.

Four days and nights they had been hemmed in by the rocky walls of this canyon. During that time the cows had averaged less than one good mouthful of feed apiece, for the dashing War Horse River took up half the canyon bottom, and the trail along the bank was rocky ledge or gravel.

"This country's backwards from Texas," a puncher yelled as the trail boss pushed past. "Plenty water, no feed. These calves

LONGHORN HELL!

By DEL RAYBURN

"No damn' cows cross Double O range!" the gunman called.

will start laying down before much longer. Too many to haul in the bed-wagon."

"Can't be much farther," Uncle Billy called back and rode on, cussing to himself.

Nearing the point, McClain found the riders had pulled up ahead somewhere and the cattle were beginning to stop, to stand bawling forlornly. Rounding a corner in the narrow canyon, he found his lead riders bunched together a short way beyond the leaders. George Saddler, his young segundo, saw him coming and spurred toward him.

"Some damned renegades got the canyon barricaded just ahead, Uncle Billy," he shouted. "Looks like we're sewed up worse'n a cat in a sack. They got all the cover."

McClain rode past his riders, motioning them to stay behind, and he could see the barricade then. Two big boulders lay on the canyon floor just ahead, one against either wall. Several stout logs had been piled against the boulders, effectively closing the trail.

When he was a few yards beyond his men, hot lead suddenly snarled out, raising a sandy geyser from the gravel a few feet ahead of his horse.

"Cut out the damn' nonsense," McClain

called, his drawl a little louder than usual. "Come out and talk, or ain't the rock-rats in this country learned how?"

"Careful how you talk about the Double O, old man!" That brought a stranger clawing up to stand atop the great boulder on the trail side of the canyon, snarling his warning. McClain took a moment to size the fellow up. From his swagger it was obvious that he was proud of his authority. He carried a new-looking rifle at the ready. Ammunition belts hung from his shoulders and crossed over his chest. Twin gunbelts were around his waist, the holstered six-guns tied low on his thighs. He stood near six feet tall, but was thin as a hungry wolf. His profession was obvious, even without looking at his thin lips and cloudy, narrow-lidded eyes. The Texan had seen many like him.

"What's the deal, son?" He saw the fellow's quick anger flush his face and glow in his cat-like eyes.

"Just this, Bushface," the gunman snarled, looking at McClain's flourishing mustache. "This trail hits Ute Park on the left side of the river, on Ace Lemiky's Double O just beyond here. And no damn' cows cross Double O range. We can't have our flocks scared up and scattered all to hell by a bunch of cow-critters blundering through."

"So it's the old story of sheep against cows," Uncle Billy drawled.

"No it ain't!" the gunman snapped. "But that's none of your business either."

"You got any objections to me riding on in alone?"

"I got objections to anyone doing business with Cap Griffin," the fellow announced, mistaking McClain's low drawl for lack of fighting spirit. And then he muttered a startled exclamation, a black scowl replacing the smirk.

* * *

GLANCING sideways, McClain found a red-headed giant of a man ambling up behind him. The man's fiery beard almost hid the bib of his worn overalls. A shotgun was held ready in his big hands.

"I got a place in the foothills above that little side-canyon back yonder, mister," the newcomer rumbled. "You can hold your cows there if you'll pay for what graze I've got."

"You keep your nose the hell out of this, Oberlin!" the gunman on the boulder yelled furiously.

"Shut up, Mike Kelso," the big man rumbled, wagging the end of his shotgun suggestively. "If I can make enough honest dollars to buy a few acres of good dirt someplace else that'll grow enough to feed my kids right, I'm doing it."

"How many acres you got?" McClain asked.

"One hundred sixty."

"Sorry, friend," the trail boss answered kindly. "That isn't even enough to bed this herd down on. Thanks anyhow. I might be able to help you out later on." He turned back to the gunman.

"Calling you a sidewinder would be insulting the name of a treacherous varmit that's noble by comparison," he drawled. "There ain't a calf in my herd would stand the trip back down this canyon. So I'm taking them on up this trail to War Horse grass—or goin' to hell tryin'!"

"You'll go to hell, then," the gunman snarled.

McClain laid the rein against his mount's neck, and turning, rode back the way he had come beyond sight of the barricade. His riders followed him, reluctantly, with Oberlin among them.

"There's a narrow break in the Fault on the park-edge of my place where one man on a horse might be able to slip down into the Park," Oberlin volunteered, coming up as McClain reined up and stepped down. He said nothing while his fingers worked on the snaps holding the legs of his batwings. Then he unbuckled the chaps and threw them across his saddle.

"They might expect something like that and be watching," McClain replied then. He brought a pair of moccasins from a saddle-pocket and shucked off his boots. "Maybe there's a place they won't be expecting me. You boys just keep your noses clean."

Settling his feet in the moccasins, old Billy scanned the canyon wall a moment. Selecting a route, he took a moment to examine his sixguns and bowie knife. Then he began the climb.

A great fault, rising twenty feet or more of sheer rock, walled Ute Park, McClain

found. Apparently the gorge down which War Horse River plunged after bisecting the great basin was the only break of any size in it.

Coming to the fault's edge near the left side of the break the river made, he found, as he had expected, the horses of the men who guarded the barricade. Directly below him a man sat, back against the stone wall, braiding a quirt to while away his time as horse guard.

The Texan drew a gun and tossed a pebble down on the Double O man's hat. The fellow glanced up, casualness changing to alarm in the time of a heartbeat, his eyes bugging in surprise.

"One chirp and you're a dead birdie," McClain told him. He came down the twenty-foot drop with the ease of a cat. Disarming the guard, he moved among the horses, bowie flashing as he cut reins and cinches, sparing only one long-legged sorrel which he kept for himself.

He was swinging to the saddle when the horse guard finally tore himself from his amazed trance.

"Kelso! Double O! Come a-running!" In helpless rage he raked up a handful of stones and began firing them at the Texan. But McClain did not mind the alarm, for he was ready to travel. He sent two fast shots among the other horses as he straddled the sorrel, stampeding them in all directions with saddles flying.

Then a stone thrown by the guard caught the sorrel in the flank and the bronc bogged his head. That was one of the things a man could never count on, the unexpected whereby a man could never be sure of winning until a game was finished. Frantically McClain tore the catch-rope on the saddle from its fastenings, then laid it on the bronc's rump without mercy, for the rifles of the barricade guards would be opening up soon.

With a mad bawl the sorrel's head came up as he lined out in a blind run. The Texan batted him around the eyes and ears until he was headed the right direction, then flattened against his neck as hell broke loose behind.

* * *

DIRT geysered all around the stampeding sorrel as a hail of hot rifle-lead fell around them. Then the bronc plunged down an almost sheer drop of thirty feet into the ravine War Horse River had cut through the middle of Ute Park. The twisting course hid them from the Double O riflemen on the high rolling flats above.

There was a trail beside the river here, as there had been up the canyon through the mountains. So he let the sorrel stampede until he was satisfied to take a slower pace. And a while later the walls of the narrow watercourse fell back to reveal a small basin ahead. In it, spread along either side of the river, lay Park Center.

McClain crossed the bridge to the east side of town and was in the intersection before he sensed the tenseness that gripped the place. Then he heard the rasp of angry voices and saw the two men who had stepped from the livery in front of him.

One was a great rock of a man, solid as an old oak, with gray temples and burning gray eyes beneath bushy brows. The other was equal in height, but thin as a fence-rail. His back was to the Texan, but McClain, watching his back, knew from his jutting head and the forward hunch that was coming into his bony shoulders that the other man faced death.

The street was strangely deserted except for that pair. The big man's voice was lashing down upon the rail-like one, driving him back step by step toward the Texan. Then another man stepped into the street from a doorway beyond. A star glinted on his vest.

The law was arriving just in time to avert a killing, McClain thought. But that was the moment the thin man chose to make his draw. The gun roared so point-blank that the big man's shirt was powder-burned. Still he made no move toward his guns, standing another moment while his fierce straight eyes condemned his enemy. Then he fell—and men poured into the street from every direction.

A crew headed across the bridge from the west side, and McClain remembered then that he was on a horse that might be termed stolen. He knotted the reins around the horn as he dismounted and sent the sorrel running.

This shooting was no business of his. The law had seen the treachery as easily as he had. He angled across toward the livery, unmindful of the growing roar of confusion around him. He meant to hire a horse, ask

the War Horse spread's location and get out there.

"You saw it, Sheriff," he heard the voice of the bony coward, pitched too high with excitement. "He made the first try for his gun. It was a case of self-defense."

The Texan grunted to himself at the fellow's gall. "He'll soon find out," he muttered. And then he stopped dead in his tracks, swinging back to the scene unbelievingly. For the lawman's voice had been unhesitating as he said, "That's right, Ace. He tried first; he got what he asked for."

"That's a damn' black and bloody lie!"

No one was more surprised to hear that uncompromising Texas oath than trail-boss McClain, but it was too late to back out now. "That man never thought about his gun. He was doing well enough with his tongue."

A hush held the crowd one moment, but a clean-cut, long-legged young puncher shouldered through it, raising his voice to say, "That's right! Cap never pulled first on no one in his life!"

The crowd's attention swung to him.

"You stay out of this, Roberts!" An older rider who had been stooping over the fallen man straightened angrily to face the puncher shouldering his way in. "I'm his foreman. I'll handle this."

"Glad he ain't mine," McClain grunted loudly, and headed on for the livery.

* * *

THE HOSTLER was somewhere in the excited crowd when the Texan reached the livery. So he walked on down the broad driveway to the corrals behind the barn, meaning to pick the horse he wanted while he was waiting. He was in the act of climbing a fence panel when a sound behind him brought him to the ground in an off-side spin, his gun coming up. And then he stood a moment feeling foolish deep inside, for running lightly toward him was a golden-haired girl of eighteen or twenty.

McClain holstered his gun quickly and waited for her. She wore a buckskin riding skirt and vest, well worn from use. Heavy braids of golden hair encircled her head. Her clear blue eyes were heavy with sadness and her wind-browned cheeks were tear-stained. But she made a picture of the kind of girl Uncle Billy McClain would have wanted had he fathered a daughter.

"I hated to leave Daddy," she exclaimed, her breath short from running, "but I couldn't risk losing you. You're a stranger and you look like a fighting man. Will you stay and help me fight them?"

McClain shook his head slowly. "I've got another job to finish first. If I ever find this Cap Griffin feller and get my Texas owners' money for their heifers, I reckon I might consider your job."

"Then you'll have to help me!" Her little fists clenched. "Dad meant to borrow the rest of the money to pay for that herd, giving the ranch as security. We can't pay for it any other way!"

"You're coming at me too fast, child," Uncle Billy breathed slowly, scrubbing a hard hand across his chin. "Are you hooked up someway with this Griffin's War Horse spread?"

"I'm Lou Griffin. Louise, I mean," she corrected hastily. "The man you saw shot was my father, Cap. And if Ace Lemiky and his Double O run us off War Horse—"

"I'm stuck with my Texas heifers," the trail boss finished, understanding. "I guess I'll have to start a new game before I'll ever be able to finish the old one," he mused.

"I knew you would!" Lou Griffin cried, grasping his hand in hers. "I can trust you, can't I?" Then she was gone, flying back down the driveway toward the street, her last anxious words leaving a strange twinge in the Texas man's heart. "I'll be at Milly's Dress Shop if you want me," she stopped a moment to call back from the far doorway.

"I've taken fights I had less stomach for," Uncle Billy McClain decided, and forgot about the horse he had come to hire, heading out instead to find some dinner.

His order had come when the street door opened and he heard the heavy tread of another man stepping in. The fellow ignored all the other empty stools along the long counter, coming to sit next to him. McClain was not surprised.

"Going to be a bad night," the newcomer observed as he seated himself beside McClain. The Texan only grunted. In a moment the fellow tried again.

"Reckon you'd be glad to get back to Texas where it's a little warmer?" Again McClain only grunted and continued eating, not voicing his thought that this range gave

promise of getting warm enough to be right interesting before much longer.

The newcomer ordered a bowl of soup and a cup of coffee before making his last try.

"You're McClain, the trail boss, aren't you?" When McClain nodded he continued, "I'm Buck Caskey, foreman out at the War Horse. Miss Griffin would like to see you tonight. She has a room over at the Maverick Hotel on the west side."

So the War Horse foreman was not only a crook but a fool, McClain thought to himself. For only a fool would think a man could spend an afternoon in this town without learning which side of the river Lou Griffin would be staying on.

He turned to face Caskey and found himself being studied by a pair of half-closed eyes. Caskey was a big fellow, a little flashy in his dress, with black, well-groomed hair showing below the edges of the big Stetson pushed back from his broad forehead. His hands appeared to have seen little work for a good while, and the gun on his thigh was rigged as if he knew how to use it.

The Texan saw in him a man who would give loyalty to no man longer than it gained something for himself. The part in the Texan's makeup that had gained him the name of Uncle Billy went out to Lou Griffin, if this man was the best she had left to her for a foreman.

"I hate to make a lady get wet," McClain said, completing his appraisal of the fellow, "but it's going to be too dark tonight for me to go over to that west side. I have room eighteen down the street here at the Longhorn. You can see me there if you care to." He saw the momentary pin-points of angry frustration that glowed in Caskey's black eyes. But he tossed the money for his bill on the counter and went out, giving the fellow no opportunity to argue the matter.

CHAPTER TWO

New Hand for War Horse

SITTING in the shadows of the hotel veranda that evening, the whole sorry picture of the treachery shaping up in this Ute Park country lay complete before McClain's keen eyes. He had pieced scraps of conversation overheard during the afternoon into the information his Texas owners had given him about this country before he started up the trail last spring. So that now he knew the country's story.

Cap Griffin and Ace Lemiky, friends in those days, had been the first settlers in Ute Park. They had divided it between themselves. Lemiky built his corrals and buildings back on the high flats west of War Horse River, halfway to the south end of the park from Park Center.

Griffin's spread was halfway to the north end, in the broad fertile meadowland through which the river coursed before cutting its ravine through the higher rangeland flats to the south. Originally this arrangement enabled each man to keep an eye on half of his friend's holdings, making less riding for both of them.

And then a girl came into the picture, and when her courtship ended, friendship between the two men ended too. For when she married Cap Griffin, Ace Lemiky swore to destroy him and his War Horse spread. And his feeling had not changed when she died a few years later, leaving Cap Griffin with a tiny girl to raise, named Louise after her, and raised by him in the saddle as "Lou," to take the place of the boy he had hoped for.

Now the fruit of hate had ripened. Soon it would burst and spew its stench over this whole country.

A touch on his shoulder brought McClain from his deep thoughts. He turned to find Buck Caskey looking down. "She's waiting in your room," the fellow said. For one moment the Texan was surprised, for he had seen no one enter by the front. But there was a back stairs, he knew, and evidently Caskey had used it.

When he reached his room he knew why. A green-eyed woman with black hair done in a knot at the nape of her neck, slightly rouged greyish-white cheeks and a cigarette in her painted lips sat in the big leather-overstuffed rocker.

"This is Miss Griffin," Caskey declared, and the woman gave the Texan a brief nod. He chose to say nothing. It was plain the War Horse foreman did not know of his earlier meeting with the real Lou Griffin.

"Better get it over with," Caskey prompted the woman.

"Yeah, I guess so." She took a last drag on her smoke and flipped it into the spittoon close by. "How much will it take to

get my herd out of hock?" she said, straightening in the chair as she addressed the Texan.

"Your, uh, father," McClain drawled, "paid ten dollars a head down. I'm to collect twenty. He wrote he wanted our remuda. So it's a hundred seventy-five thousand, with the five hundred horses thrown in."

The woman glanced at Caskey as if for prompting, and McClain caught his slight nod. Her hand dipped inside the neck of her dress and reappeared with a tight roll of large-denomination bills which she tossed to the top of the writing desk.

"There it is. Count 'em."

"You can just make the bill of sale to War Horse Ranch, Ute County, Montana," Buck Caskey instructed.

That was the tip-off, McClain thought. He fished an old tally book from his hip pocket and wrote in detail as to brands and numbers covered by the bill. And he made the new title directly to Louise Griffin, for had it been made simply to War Horse Ranch, anyone in possession of the ranch and holding such a bill of sale could claim the cattle.

"Howcome War Horse needed so much new stuff, and a remuda?" he asked, completing the paper and beginning another copy of it.

"We wanted better blood," Caskey answered. "And when we cleaned off the range last year a Canadian outfit made a good offer on our remuda. So—"

McClain rose and handed him a copy of the bill of sale he had made. The other copy he kept, seeming to give his attention to folding it.

The War Horse foreman's hand fell to his gun. At that moment the Texan turned. He appeared as casual in his movements as in his speech, but a gun was in his hand and Caskey's was only halfway out of leather.

"You want the money back already?" McClain's inference was plain.

"This bill of sale—" Buck Caskey stammered.

"—Is made to Louise Griffin, only heir of Cap Griffin," the trail boss finished for him. He drew a money belt from inside his shirt and began unlacing it. "I'm going down to put this money in the safe. I'll be back if you want to take this up." He opened the hall door behind him and stepped out.

The hall curved a little and opened upon a sitting room which looked out upon the street below. Here were several overstuffed chairs and a big couch-like sofa. Making sure he was unobserved, McClain hastily lifted the center cushion of the sofa, shoving the roll of bills down the back and deep into the bottom. Then he stuffed an old paper into the money belt and went down to the lobby to deposit it in the safe.

Caskey and the woman were gone when he returned to his room. Taking his hat, he went down to the street.

* * *

THE GUN GUARDS behind the barricade were gone when McClain rode back the next morning. But he scouted the place carefully, letting the gray light of the drizzly dawn grow stronger before he risked showing himself and rode in.

George Saddler appeared around the corner of the canyon just beyond, in answer to the trail boss's call. The segundo rode forward cautiously, as if not believing his eyes, then spurred into a run.

"You whup 'em all by yourself, Uncle Billy?" he queried incredulously, peering over and finding the barricade unmanned as he reined to a stop just beyond. "Strange goings-on in this here country. We was just about ready to stampede over this place and go in to take that two-bit town apart if we didn't find you."

"Strange goings-on all right," McClain agreed. "Get some of the boys to pull this down." He indicated the barrier. "We've got to get them cows on out to grass. Five miles more and this job is done."

The segundo went racing back to the crew with the news. An hour later the great herd was moving. Weak calves struggled along at their hungry mothers' flanks, but all of them were still on their feet. Taking the first ford he found, McClain led the herd across the river and up a steep grade to the high rolling flats on the east side, War Horse range. Sometime not long before it had been swept by fire, but now green blades were thick above the black sod. In a few days the herd would never know it had been hungry.

It was a little past noon when the trail

boss rode back into Park Center with his thirty-man crew strung out behind him. The fat hotelman ran into the street to meet him, wringing his hands as he cried, "Mister McClain! A bunch of bandits surprised me this morning and got away with the safe. Your money belt—"

"Won't make them rich," the Texan chuckled. "I'm sorry you lost your safe, though."

Retrieving the roll of bills from the bottom of the big sofa in the hall above the lobby, McClain peeled one from the roll and handed it to Saddler, who had come in with him.

"Break it at the bank and pay the boys off," he instructed. "Split what's left and give them a bonus. Tell them if they want to stay with me a few more days they'll draw gun-pay. I've got a fight to settle before I leave here."

"Then I'll whup the man that even thinks about pulling out until it's over!" George Saddler exclaimed, and wheeled back down the stairs.

McClain watched his segundo's two-step-at-a-time descent with a grin. He liked Saddler. The man was a typical Texan, a top-hand with stock and a crew. But in him too was that typical impulsive recklessness and disregard of danger, the spirit that sometimes makes men sacrifice their lives needlessly. Because of it, boothills all along the trails up from Texas were filled with straight-eyed Texas youngsters who had come up the trail for a lark, and had never ridden back.

Turning down the hall to his room, the trail boss found himself regretting the invitation he had given his crew to side him. There were times like these when a man did not know what move was best to make.

He found that his room had been turned upside-down. Thus it was evident that whoever had taken the hotel safe had soon discovered his trickery. Very likely they were still in town. They had ripped the lining out of the big rocking-chair. The cushion was on the floor, the coil springs in its bottom bare. He stuck the roll of bills into a coil, put the cushion back in the chair and sat down. A moment later George Saddler burst into the room.

"The boys say for you to hold the

This blade lasts long and serves you well—
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It saves real dough and time—you bet!
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money," he announced, holding the bill out for McClain to take. "Then we won't get drunk. We've got money enough for sody pop and eats for a while."

"I heard about a feller once, name of Gideon," McClain declared, taking the bill between the thumb and forefinger in each hand and popping it idly. "He was coming up against a fight and found out he had too many men. I'm afraid maybe I'm fixed like that."

"That don't make sense to me," Saddler exclaimed.

"Lemiky waited twenty years to get Griffin. We might be here a long time, unless we can force his hand. If you was a sneaky coyote, what would make you fight when nothing else would?"

"I reckon if someone said he was going to run me out of my den," Saddler declared, "that would bring me out fighting."

McClain thought this over. Somewhere behind the street on which the Longhorn Hotel stood, he heard a church bell tolling. That would be the bell before the beginning of Cap Griffin's funeral. Then farther away, to the west, a burst of wild shots rang out, like those a celebrating puncher would fire. The shots seemed to bring his answer. The west side!

* * *

A THREAT to the west side would be a threat to Lemiky. If Lemiky failed to back the wide-open west side, then he would cause a split in his own ranks. And the stolen safe gave the Texan an excuse. The fact that it had not held the Texas money made the plan all the better. For the men who had actually taken the safe would be suspected by all the others. It was such little things that sometimes ruined an otherwise perfect organization. McClain heaved to his feet and led Saddler down to the street.

The trail crew followed their boss into the saddle and strung out behind him, not knowing what was up but eager for something to break. A hard wind hit McClain as he headed west toward the bridge. Above, it was whipping the overcast away, and it felt a little raw as it sucked up the moisture that had fallen in the hours just before.

But on the west side riders raced and whirled, playing the games horsemen play, just as if it were a fine day. Occasionally one let out a wild howl or discharged a gun skyward. Others spun ropes, and several swarthy-faced fellows were using a small circle on the front of a building as a target in a knife-throwing contest. The rough boardwalks were lined with spectators.

But the celebration paused as the Texans hit the bridge and roared across. On the other side, McClain motioned his crew to spread out along the street. Then he rode along slowly, facing the crowd. Somewhere there would be a leader. He meant to find him.

Suddenly the batwings of a rotgut dive crashed back and a great bull of a man strode out with a sawed-off shotgun cradled in one great hairy arm. McClain knew he had found his man.

"I came to tell you snakes to keep your rattles quiet," the trail boss challenged. "There's a man being buried over yonder."

"Why, you high-riding Texas—" the big man broke off, swinging his shotgun up.

To the eye McClain's hand did not appear to move, but a snarling slug smashed into the shotgun-butt and sent the ugly weapon spinning, leaving the black-browed giant who had held it groaning with pain and wringing his numbed arms.

"Some of you coyotes lifted a safe from the Longhorn," McClain continued as if nothing had happened. "For a hundred seventy-five thousand dollars of Texas money my crew and I will flatten this scab of hell like a prairie twister had hit it. We'll be back at midnight if the money isn't returned before then."

"You'll get a slug in the teeth if you come," a voice snarled, and a man shouldered up from the back of the crowd. The Texan recognized him. Mike Kelso, the red-bearded homesteader had called him—Ace Lemiky's foreman, the man who had stopped the herd at the barricade. McClain had a sudden inspiration.

"It won't come out of any of the guns you skunks are packing now," he declared. "We're taking them along. Shuck them!"

The Texas crew behind him held ready guns on the crowd now, and grudgingly they complied. This was heaping insult upon injury, but it would force a quick showdown—and that was what McClain wanted.

A few minutes later the west-side crowd stood unarmed before the Texans, and two punchers moved gingerly among them collecting the piles of weapons. But Kelso had not moved. He was the leader of a professional gun-crew. To give up his gun was to give up his pride. It would even make him fair meat for his own men.

"What about you?" McClain prompted, stepping from his horse to face the fellow when all the other arms had been gathered.

"I'm keeping mine!"

"You'll have to use it, then." The trail boss shoved his own gun back into the holster and paced forward slowly, adding, "Or I'll take it away from you."

"I sent lead your way about this time yesterday," Mike Kelso snarled. "I won't miss today! There was only one tiny twitch as his shoulder muscles gathered, but that was signal enough for Billy McClain.

He made a quick sidestep as the Double O foreman's gun leveled, roaring. Hot lead fanned his cheek. Then his own gun was spitting fire. Kelso's gun hit the dirt as the fellow clutched at his middle, then plunged forward on his head in the dust.

McClain mounted in an empty silence, felt the crowd's hate rise around him. He wheeled his horse and snapped a shot into the boards between the planted feet of the saloonman, calling, "If you don't want that shack of yours flattened, get that Texas money back to Longhorn before midnight!"

Then he led his crew across the bridge.

CHAPTER THREE

Bullets Take the Pot

JOHNNIE ROBERTS drove the buckboard that brought Lou Griffin back to War Horse.

"A man wanted to see Buck a few minutes about some business," she explained to McClain. "When he comes, I wish you'd come up to the house."

McClain and his crew had ridden straight to the ranch after leaving the west side of Park Center to sizzle and fry in growing hate. The one way, the trail boss figured, to win a close game when your opponent was very near a match for you, was to get him so mad he would forget caution. And so he had withdrawn from the town to let the west side work up to a rage.

The boys were settled in the big bunkhouse and Greasy had supper ready. Johnnie Roberts tied the buckboard team to a corral fence when McClain asked him to come eat with the crew.

"Livery nags," the long-legged puncher explained, knowing the Texan would wonder why he did not unharness. "Got to take them back, quick as I eat."

Before the meal was half over the long-legged Roberts had been accepted as one of the bunch by the trail crew. He had a ready smile and a quick reply for all the josh thrown at him.

"I heard about the little party you fellers had on the west side," he declared enviously. "I sure wish I coulda been along. That would of been better fun than chasing wild horses."

"You ever catch a wild horse, cowboy?" Ted Murphy, a trail hand, wanted to know.

"One or two," Johnnie Roberts grinned back. "Lately though, I been too busy herding sheep."

That brought a roar of laughter, but McClain's curiosity was aroused, for he had wondered why Ace Lemiky's sheep had not taken over the War Horse range, since it had been cleaned of cattle and had no crew to defend it.

One thing he knew: a great part of it had burned over. And he wondered if someone had fired it in the face of invading sheep. He felt a growing interest in Johnnie Roberts and would have liked to question him, but a horse pounded into the ranchyard just then. Going to the door, McClain saw Buck Caskey dismounting at the house.

Ace Lemiky says he has nothing against you," a voice McClain knew for Buck Caskey's was declaring earnestly somewhere inside when the trail boss reached the house. "He says you can pool the ranches and he'll run them as a partnership. You'll have money. You can live here if you want, or you can travel, do anything you like. I think you should do it!"

"You're a fool, Buck!" Lou Griffin's calm voice was a feminine counterpart of what McClain knew her great father's must have been. "Do you really think I'd become a partner of the snake who killed my father in cold blood?"

"Ace is sorry about that."

"Sorry! He's sorry he gave up that

money those thugs of his robbed you of, and got nothing in return but a bill of sale good to no one but me."

"You're going to let that Texan get you into trouble if you don't mind," Caskey said. He did not know just how much she knew about the bill-of-sale transaction, and wanted to get her mind away from it. "The sheriff has a warrant against him for Mike Kelso's murder this afternoon."

The girl had not heard of the affair and for a moment she did not speak. For that one moment Caskey thought he had triumphed. Then she said, "Rube Hastings isn't man enough to serve it. It's strange, but it seems to make a difference who holds the gun."

McClain heard the foreman's sharp, heavy tread as he strode angrily from the girl's presence. A back door slammed hard a moment later. Then Lou Griffin appeared on the front porch and looked down at the trail boss, standing as he had paused with one foot resting on the bottom step.

"You heard?"

He nodded.

"I don't understand Buck sometimes," she murmured. "He doesn't think like I do about—so many things." Unconsciously she was fingering the diamond ring on her left hand. Then her thoughts shifted.

"What are you going to do?"

"I made my play this afternoon," McClain explained. "Lemiky will have to move next, or he'll lose his backing."

"He won't risk that," she said.

"No." He turned back to the cookshack. Johnnie Roberts dusted by, the livery team in a smart run as they headed homeward, the west wind whipping a fine sifting dust from the wheels.

* * *

SHORTLY after McClain returned to the cookshack to resume his supper, Buck Caskey entered. Oddly enough, the fellow's mood had changed. He seemed almost friendly.

"Good to see life around the place again," he declared. The rest of the men had returned to the bunkhouse, and when McClain did not answer the War Horse foreman dropped to a seat across the table, facing him.

"What did you tell her about last night?"

"Just enough." He let Caskey wonder just how much that was.

"What difference does all this make to you?"

"Her daddy put the last money he had in that herd of heifers before they left Texas. For her sake he'd tried to sidestep this fight, but Lemiky wouldn't drop it. As a man, I'm just as responsible to her for that herd as I was to my Texas owners."

"You didn't lose their money, then?"

When McClain did not answer Caskey got up and paced back and forth along the long table several minutes. Then he said, "We'll have to have more ammunition. Will you take an order in for me?"

McClain knew that he and his Texans had plenty of ammunition. But he felt there was something deeper behind the request. He nodded his consent.

Caskey went out and McClain went to the corral to saddle up. It was full dark now, but the wind was steady and the sky was swept clean.

The Texan rode back to the cookshack and had not stepped down when Buck Caskey came up from somewhere beyond, and handed him a sealed envelope addressed to a Park Center merchant. McClain folded it and put it in his shirt pocket. Then looking down at Caskey, he said deliberately, "You make up your mind which side you're fighting on, Caskey. If you stay here and betray her, I'll kill you."

He gave his horse rein and rode away from the man then. Riding through the narrow lane of yellow light from the door of the bunkhouse, he called, "I'm taking a little ride, boys. Keep your ears open."

Then he went forward into the night, riding alert in his saddle.

Two miles out from the ranch, the trail passed through some willows growing by the little stream that ran down to the river there. A subtle warning came out from the place and rang its bells in every nerve of McClain's body. His horse felt it too and shortened his pace, ready to dodge away when the danger showed itself. It was a place a man could have ridden around, except for his pride.

Suddenly McClain put spurs to his horse, sending him plunging forward. He heard a man's short yell of surprise and the thrashing of a horse's feet in the brush. A gun seemed to explode in his face, the

breath of the bullet touching his cheek. Then the Texan slammed into the ambusher, lashing out with his gun-barrel. The fellow got off one more wild shot before McClain clubbed him down.

McClain stepped out of the saddle. He heard the rattle of fast-rolling wheels on the trail not far beyond. He crouched over the fallen gunman and waited.

"Who's in there?" Johnnie Robert's tense voice rose above the sound of a team being dragged to a fast stop.

"McClain," the Texan answered, and fished out a match. He lit it, and then Roberts was at his side.

"Know him?" McClain rolled the fellow over until the light struck his evil face.

"A Lemiky man," Roberts answered. "I thought someone was hid out here when I went through. I was waiting just beyond the hill up ahead."

knew they were there. It was that simple." The girl's voice was quavering as she ended, "Buck Caskey was siding the sheriff. There's nobody with me."

"I may not count," Johnnie Roberts spoke up hesitantly, coming up behind McClain, "but I think I know where I could still get a fighting crew for War Horse."

"Johnnie," Lou Griffin cried in a small beaten voice. "Johnnie Roberts!"

"Yeah, I'm just a crazy bronc rider who chases wild horses and don't catch many," he murmured, "but I've seen a lot. Seen grass fires break out just the right place to turn Lemiky's sheep away from War Horse range. And I've made friends of those homesteaders at the south end. They'd be glad to fight for War Horse if there was maybe a few acres of good dirt in it for them."

"That's right," McClain agreed, remem-

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"Then Buck Caskey planned this," McClain said. A sudden thought seized him. He took the envelope Caskey had given him from his pocket, ripped it open and pulled out a piece of paper. The light of another match fell on it, and it was a clean piece of white paper.

"Let's get back to the ranch!" he muttered, a chill sweeping through him.

* * *

A MILE from the ranch, McClain heard the sobbing gasps of someone running through the night toward him. He reined in and stepped to the ground. A moment later Louise Griffin almost fell in his arms.

"They've got the ranch!" was all she could gasp at first.

"Your men heard the shooting and went piling into the corral for horses," she explained when she could talk. "The sheriff and five men rode out of the darkness and surrounded them with shotguns before they

bering the words of the big Irish homesteader, Oberlin.

"If we beat Ace Lemiky they can have all he has," Lou Griffin cried fiercely, her fighting spirit returning. "And if we just stand him off they can each have fifty acres of the best dirt in our meadows."

"Good!" Roberts exclaimed, and there was confidence in his voice now. He turned to the trail boss and said, "You get to town and at midnight sharp get a fire started in that tall grass west of town. With this wind behind it, it'll go into that west side a-helling. I'll have a fighting crew there to kill off the rats as they come out of their holes!"

"I'll try to get there, Johnnie," McClain promised. He was pleased with the way the young puncher had taken charge, because he had been wondering whom he could leave to help the girl get the ranch on its feet, even if War Horse did win out in this fight. Now he knew that was one thing he no longer had to worry about.

He continued, "I'll do my best, but first

I've got to go back and help my boys. Even against those shotguns, George Saddler will bring them out of there if I don't go back. But some of them will get killed that way."

"I'll set the fire then!" Lou Griffin cried.

The sound of running horses came to them from the direction of the ranch and they drew away from the trail until four riders flashed past against the skyline.

"Wonder how Blackie came out with the old man?" Buck Caskey's voice boomed out on the night as they passed.

"Damn him!" Lou Griffin stamped a little foot suddenly as the sound of the running horses drew away. "I hope you kill him, Johnny!"

"That leaves only three shotguns," McClain whispered. "I'd better go take care of them. Good luck, kids!"

* * *

George Saddler's eyes almost bugged from their sockets when McClain opened the bunkhouse door and walked in, to be covered cold by Sheriff Rube Hastings' sawed-off shotgun.

"You, Uncle Billy!" the rider exclaimed, gasping his surprise. "Well, by gosh, I'm almost glad. Now I don't feel so bad about the way they caught me settin' cold."

Hastings lifted the Texan's gun and shoved him toward the center of the room. "Sit down!" he commanded.

"I was going to," McClain replied calmly. "I feel like a little poker. These things —" he shelled several .45 cartridges from his belt—"don't seem to be doing me much good, so I'll give someone a chance to win a few. Some of you Texas boys will have to play with me, I reckon. These home-guard visitors we got likely wouldn't get far in a game with a real gambler."

"So you think you're a cardshark, too," the Ute County sheriff jeered. "I guess Tom and me will have to show you. You get over here by the door, Jim," he ordered one of the shotgun guards. "See that these other jaspers don't pull any fast ones while we clean this old Texas windbag."

And so began a poker game in which the stakes were the highest McClain had ever played for: the happiness of a whole lifetime for a sweet, straight-eyed girl, and the lives of hard-working homesteader men and the safety of his own men. It did not occur to him that his own life was in the balance too. It was for others that he played, and he played like a man inspired.

Slowly the stack of cartridges on the table grew, as the Ute County lawmen drew upon their belts. Sweat broke out all over McClain as he pushed play after play and won. It seemed that every hand took an eternity; Time hung like a poised knife above his head.

When the lawmen hesitated he jeered them on, goading them with his taunts, letting them win just often enough to keep them coming.

Finally the guard by the door tossed them the last cartridge from his belt. Then they drew their guns and took out the loads, so possessed by the heat of the game they did not realize the significance of what they were doing.

McClain let the lawmen take several pots then. It drew them deeper into the game. Then he cleaned them again. And once more they called upon the guard by the door for cartridges. He pulled the last lead from his sixgun and tossed it to them.

To McClain it seemed the game had lasted a thousand years. There was a dull thud in his head with each heartbeat as his nerves strained to follow each turn and combination of the cards, each flicker of expression on the faces of the lawmen.

Then the Texan maneuvered and set the stage for the showdown. With grim delight the lawmen raked in several big pots. And the Texan seemed suddenly to wilt before them. It was not a hard act for McClain to pull, for his nerves were worn to a frayed edge.

"I've had enough," he drawled dispiritedly. "I'm putting all I've got into the pot. High hand cleans the table."

It was Sheriff Rube Hastings' deal, and the crooked lawman imagined himself to be a master cardshark. His eyes gleamed with delight, and McClain knew he was thinking of the pat hand he would deal himself from the deck's bottom.

"We'll call you," Hastings announced, and began counting out shells. But big as their piles had grown in the last few hands, the lawmen did not have enough to cover McClain's bet—and they were eager not to be denied their victory.

"How much is a shotgun shell worth?" Hastings questioned.

"No more to me than a forty-five," McClain drawled wearily.

The two lawmen opened the breeches of the ugly weapons that lay across their laps. Very likely they had more ammunition for the guns in their saddle-pockets, but the four shells in the chambers were all they had in the bunkhouse with them. They needed one more to meet McClain's bet.

"Give us one of yours, Jim," Hastings ordered. The guard by the door had become engrossed in the game too, and had not noticed how closely two of the Texans had approached him. He opened the breech of his gun—and at that moment every Texan in the house moved. Fists swung repeatedly, with grim efficiency. A moment later the grim game was over.

"Saddle!" McClain shouted, and sent the crew roaring for the corral.

* * *

TOPPING a rise halfway to Park Center, they saw a glow climb into the sky. Racing in the last long mile a little later, they found the whole west side a roaring hell, fanned in steady fury by a hard wind out of the west.

"You're damn' near too late for the party, Texas man," the red-bearded giant, Oberlin, bellowed as he loomed out of the shadows where McClain reined to a sliding stop. "We just about got this skunk den cleaned out. This country'll be fit to live in tomorrow."

But the trail boss had no time to answer, for Lou Griffin was racing up then, crying, "Uncle Billy!" She must have picked the name up from George Saddler. "Ace and Buck have Johnnie cornered in Hennessie's barn!" McClain spurred down the last of the trail, into the inferno where she had pointed.

He found Hennessie's barn easily in the day-like light of the fire. The barn's roof was a solid sheet of flame, and he felt the skin of his face crinkle and break as the wind drove the heat at him.

Two men crouched behind stall partitions across the driveway from each other when he reached the barn door. Their backs were to him, but he recognized Lemiky's bony figure and Buck Caskey's thick back. Somewhere from the hell of heat beyond, Johnnie Roberts' voice called, "I'm coming out!"

The waiting killers tensed forward. But McClain drew, calling, "Here, Ace!"

The man's evil face snapped around. Then his gun swiveled, spitting lead. A flame seemed to sear McClain's left side, but he saw Lemiky take lead in the belly.

It shook the man, but the demon possessing him would not let him die. He triggered again and the lead smashed through McClain's right thigh. But the Texan's second shot took away one of Lemiky's glowing, hate-filled eyes, and the fellow crumpled.

Caskey was sprawled out on the driveway, McClain found. But Johnny Roberts was down too, just beyond. And there rose a sharp, cracking roar as burned-away timbers broke and the roof began to cave.

McClain reached the fallen War Horse man and tried to lift him, but his bullet-torn right leg almost gave away under him. He felt almost beaten for the first time, for he could not leave the wounded youngster. A man could take only so much pressure, and McClain had about reached his limit.

Then a pleading voice was spurring him to new effort. He found Lou Griffin by his side, lifting as much of Johnnie Roberts' weight as he did and driving him on.

For an age they struggled to reach the barn's doorway and the street beyond. Then they made it. And the roof came down behind them, a rush of scorching air blasting them across the narrow street and rolling them in the dust.

The tough old Texas trail boss had taken all the punishment he could handle for a little while. He slipped off into a black void to rest.

* * *

Awaking, Uncle Billy McClain found himself between stiff white sheets and pretty well done up in bandages. There was another bed in the room, and Lou Griffin hovered over it.

"Johnnie's going to be all right too," she beamed, finding Uncle Billy's eyes upon her. And the look in her eyes as she bent over the sleeping man in the other bed told the old Texan she had found a "foreman" who would give satisfaction for a lifetime.

"I got to get out of this danged place and hit the trail," he grumbled. "It's getting too damn' peaceful around here for a man from Texas."

THE END

Killin' Ain't Neighborly

"Play along with us," Newg Tegor offered. "When we've blasted the Lazy A off this range, you'll get your share of old Agnew's water." . . . But Jeff Rainey, nester, knew that the only water he'd get was rain—in an open grave!

THE KID was dead before the twenty armed riders thundered up to the soddy on the knoll. Jeff Rainey stood in front of his cabin and watched the men dismount. He recognized Newg Tegor, the Box T boss, and the knife-scarred face of Ludwig, Tegor's gun-handy foreman.

"Where's the kid?" Tegor demanded, drawing his gun.

"Dead," Jeff said. His voice was hard.

Jeff's horse swerved, catching the gunmen off guard. . . .

By THOMAS THOMPSON

"You don't need a gun to talk to me."

Ludwig stepped forward and grasped Jeff by the shirt-front. "You killed him, eh?" he said in a thick, blurred accent.

For a second Jeff forgot Tegor's gun trained on his middle—forgot the twenty men ringed around him. He swung a short right jab into the scarred face in front of him and felt his work-hardened fist crack on bone. Ludwig's head snapped back and he tumbled in the dust of the young homesteader's yard.

That queer spell that comes over a mob faced by the sheer grit of one man quieted these men in front of him. Not a gun moved from its holster. There was a grin on Newg Tegor's twisted face.

"You got a lot of guts for a nester," Tegor said, spitting over his chin.

Jeff took advantage of the situation. "I got this to say," he said loudly enough for all to hear. "I want no part in your cattle war. I've got no hook-up with Milt Agnew. and I sure as hell don't want no part of you."

"Too bad," Tegor said sadly. "It'd mean water from the river for you, too. Always figgered I'd buy that upper bend, soon as Agnew got a little pressed."

Ludwig stirred and sat up, rubbing his jaw. When he saw Jeff the scar on his face turned a bright purple. Veins bulged on his forehead. His hand streaked for his gun, but Newg Tegor kicked the weapon viciously from the foreman's hand.

"I told you we got use for this nester," Tegor said with a snarl. "Keep your hooks off that gun."

Ludwig got to his feet and brushed the dust from his clothes. Newg Tegor was smiling at Jeff. "You see, son? We don't mean you no harm. I just saved your life!" The men dutifully laughed at their boss's joke.

"No," Tegor went on. "I ain't even mad about you killin' the kid. He wasn't worth a damn anyway. Too hot-headed. In fact, I'm kinda glad. Now I know for sure where you stand. We can use one of Milt Agnew's men right now."

"If you think I'm tied up with Agnew you're crazy," Jeff said. "I found the kid down by the river. I brought him here, thinking I could patch him up." He was beginning to see a method in Tegor's talk.

"That's what I expected you to say," Tegor said. "But you forget we've seen you moonin' around the Agnew girl. Good taste you got, too. She's—"

"You shut your mouth!" Jeff snapped, lunging forward. Tegor's gun jammed in his middle. His voice was crisp and steady.

"You ain't dealing with a hot-headed gunnie now," he said softly "Get the hell back in line!"

Jeff stepped back. It was silly to try to make a stand now. But if he mentioned Nancy Agnew's name again— Sweat popped from Jeff's forehead.

"That's better," Tegor said, using the same tone he had used before. "No, you ain't going to get hurt yet. Not until after you ride over to Agnew's with us tonight."

Jeff was beginning to see the plan in Tegor's mind. In trying to stay out of this war between the two ranches, Jeff could see where he was fast getting in the middle.

"You and a couple of my boys can ride up to the ranch. That moon-eyed gal of yours will think her Romeo has come to pay a call. By the time she finds out different—" Tegor shrugged. "Then you'll be in a hell of a fix, won't you, nester? What with Agnew's men finding you give 'em the double-cross—and with Ludwig, here, right behind you, not liking you a little bit."

"And if I don't go?" Jeff asked.

"You'll go," Tegor said easily.

For a second it seemed to Jeff that Tegor had relaxed his hold on the gun he held. In that second Jeff lunged. His fingers gripped Tegor's hand with a bone-cracking fierceness. But Tegor had had time to see what was coming. His left hand snaked his other gun from its holster. The heavy .44 came up and down in a flashing arc. Jeff felt the barrel bite into his scalp. He broke away, both hands clutching his head, staggering blindly. He didn't see it, but he felt it was Ludwig's foot that tripped him and then kicked him as he fell.

* * *

WHEN Jeff opened his eyes Tegor was pouring a bucket of water over his face and head. He was lying in the yard, and he could feel the mud from the spilled water oozing under his back and matting the hair on his throbbing head. It was dark.

Jeff tried to get his thoughts together.

They mulled around, not making sense. All he could think of was the water they were pouring over him. His precious water. Couldn't even haul it from the river, now that Milt Agnew had turned on him, let alone ditch it.

And Nancy— He remembered her eyes when he had first told her about his plans for the ranch here on the edge of the valley— His brain cleared and he sat up.

"Well," Tegor said. "So you wasn't dead! Thought for a minute your skull wasn't as thick as I figgered. Now if you behave, you won't get any more and we'll ride in about an hour." He tossed the bucket aside and strode over to where the men had built a guarded fire.

Jeff's ribs ached with every heartbeat, and there was a wicked gash in his thigh where someone had dragged a spur across his flesh. The wave of anger that surged through him cleared his mind and set the blood running through his complaining muscles.

So they were going to ride on Milt Agnew tonight? Jeff smiled grimly in spite of himself as he thought of his part in the raid. Agnew didn't have any more use for Jeff Rainey than Tegor did. But somehow Jeff couldn't blame old Milt. Guess it did look funny, packing that wounded Box T kid in.

He winced when he thought of the hatred that had blazed in Nancy Agnew's wide blue eyes. Now Agnew was gunning for him too. Some quick-triggered hand of Agnew's would put a bullet through him before he got very far.

It wasn't that he was afraid of dying. Jeff had been up against death more than once. But there was one thing that Jeff couldn't take. The thought of dying out there with Box T men—and of Nancy Agnew hearing of it, and going on through life more convinced than ever that he had been in with her dad's enemies.

Jeff lay still. Slowly the pain faded from his body and he started moving his muscles. First just his toes inside his boots, then his fingers. Finally he was flexing the muscles in his arms by gripping and ungripping his fists.

Tegor was talking, loud, outlining his plan and the part that every man would play. "Ludwig, you stay back with me," he said. "Some of Agnew's men know you. I don't want them to suspect what's going on until we fire the barn. Then let 'em come. We can pick them off like flies as they come out of the bunkhouse. Tug and Hackett will ride ahead with the nester."

Jeff felt a ray of hope creep into his rapidly clearing mind. Only two to worry about. He'd handled two men before.

"Go get the nester's horse," Tegor said. "It's dark enough to start. Remember now, Ludwig and I will handle the girl. In case we don't do a clean job tonight, we'll have her to force the old buzzard with."

Jeff's mind was working at top speed. Slowly he got to his hands and knees, then staggered to his feet. On crazy, uncertain legs he walked over to where Tegor was standing.

"Okay, Tegor," he said. "You win. I've had enough. I won't cause you no trouble."

Tegor grinned. "Now you're talking sense," he said. "Get up on that horse."

Jeff made a feeble try and slid back. "Can't make it," he gasped. "Help me."

Tegor laughed. "Not so cocky now, are you?" he taunted.

Two men boosted Jeff into the saddle, and Jeff slumped forward, gripping the horn tightly. His eyes darted from side to side, trying to make out which of the men would be the two that would ride with him. He soon found out. Tegor signaled two men to mount and gave them some final word.

The one called Tug was an ape of a man, hairy of arms and chest, torso like a barrel and a face that resembled some prehistoric beast. Hackett, in contrast, was small and wiry, with a thin sunken look and quivering, delicate hands.

The men mounted and rode out into the night, Jeff and his guards leading the way. Jeff swore that he would ride, come hell or high water. This was the only break he had had tonight and he intended to make the most of it. His body throbbed with every jog of the horse, and he was violently ill, but he held on.

The other men didn't talk. They were old hands at this game. They had taken some barley sacks and a can of coal-oil from his place, Jeff noticed. Jeff thought of Agnew's big barn. It would burn, all right. The moon came up and silhouetted them as they rode across the saddle above the river and strung out into the pass.

It was eight miles to Milt Agnew's Lazy

A ranch house. Most of the trail skirted along the edge, where Agnew's property line reached out in a long "L" to take in the upper bend in the river. That was where Jeff had planned on running the ditch. He shrugged and took a lungful of air. His chest felt like he had swallowed a bucket of hot coals, but the full breath gave him strength. He was careful to keep slouched in his saddle.

From here on they would ride in scrub-oak country, along the top of the ridge. Farther down the trail opened into the winding canyon that spread into Agnew's rich pasture-land. That's where they would split up, Jeff figured. The rest of the gang could wait there and have a good view of what went on.

Somehow, he'd have to warn Agnew. Agnew had plenty of men. Must be thirty or forty there now, ready to hit the trail. The trick would be getting to Agnew without getting shot! Old Milt wasn't one to make idle threats, and he had been plenty plain in saying that his men would be after Jeff Rainey's scalp.

* * *

JEFF HAD guessed right about Tegor's plans, for near the mouth of the canyon Tegor motioned the men into a dark cut-bank.

"From here on the nester, Tug, and Hackett ride alone," he said. He looked at Jeff, sagging in the saddle. "Remember, you're just a couple of boys from town riding home with Rainey, here, and you're stopping by for a minute. They can't see your brands in the dark. Get the barn lit, then hit for cover. What happens to the nester from then on is up to him."

Jeff couldn't see where he was coming out on the deal, win or lose. Right now he didn't care, just so he could get in there in time. See that Agnew was warned—and see that Nancy was safe.

"Listen, sod-buster," Tegor said in that low, even tone he had used once before, "we're taking the girl. We ain't going to hurt her. Just use her to make her old man come to time. But if you make one bad move tonight you won't recognize her the next time you see her!"

Jeff felt a shiver move him in the saddle. He knew Tegor wasn't making idle talk. Tegor was holding the cards. But for one mistake his plan would be perfect. Jeff grinned at the irony of the one mistake. He wondered what Tegor would think when he saw the hot-lead welcome his decoy got from Agnew's men!

"Let's hear you talk," Tegor demanded of Jeff.

"I can talk all right," Jeff said.

"Be damn' sure you say the right thing," Tegor reminded.

The three men rode. Jeff could see that

Tug and Hackett were taking no chances on him. He cursed his luck. It would be too late after they turned him loose down in front of the barn. Tug and Hackett would have the barn blazing before he could warn anyone. He'd have to move before then.

Jeff waited until they were almost to the edge of Agnew's corrals before he made his play. He was surprised that they had seen no sign of life around the ranch. Everything was quiet and peaceful, with only the night sounds of the animals disturbing the stillness.

The bunkhouse was to the right, and Agnew's big white house showed its peaked roof through the grove of cottonwoods that surrounded it. The barn stood bold and plain in the moonlight, mothering a cluster of sheds. There was a slight breeze, and it brought the scent of dry grass drenched with dew, and the tang of dead leaves. From the house a keen-eared hound picked up the sound of the horses and set up a low, mournful wail. Crickets chirped ceaselessly.

Jeff gripped the reins tightly and with a soft prayer to his god, jerked hard. His horse reared, slamming solidly into Hackett's mount. As Hackett tried to control his startled animal Jeff slashed the reins across Tug's face, then cut right and left at the gunmen's plunging horses. Crouching low, he dug his heels into his mount's flanks. The animal streaked out, straight toward the Lazy A bunkhouse.

The wind in his face, the speeding horse under him, and the fact that he was free put new life into Jeff Rainey. The horse swerved to miss the bunkhouse. Jeff threw himself from the horse while the animal was still on a dead run. Wildly he beat on the door. Not a sound answered his pounding. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Tug and Hackett, racing in across the far side of the pasture.

He turned, the breath whistling in his lungs, and ran toward the big house. Halfway there, the hound came out to meet him. Jeff could see the animal in a wavering patch of moonlight that dodged from side to side as the trees moved in the slight wind. The dog was crouched, teeth showing in a wicked snarl as if he too knew that Jeff was no longer welcome here. Jeff paused, hand outstretched, coaxing the brute.

The hound did not give an inch. Jeff glanced back. Tug and Hackett had made sure Jeff had roused no one at the bunkhouse and had turned back. He could not see them, but he knew they were headed for the barn.

"I hate to do this, fellow," Jeff said softly to the hound, "but it's you or me." He picked up a heavy stick that was lying at his feet.

"That's far enough, Jeff Rainey," a voice said.

Jeff straightened and looked into the steady bore of a .44 held in the dainty but capable hand of Nancy Agnew.

"Nancy!" he gasped. "Nancy—get the men. Tegor's on his way!"

"Don't talk to me—you—killer!" she said, her voice trembling.

"Shut up and listen, you little fool," he snapped. "Tegor's on his way with twenty men, I tell you. Two men are down there setting fire to the barn right now." Rage shook him and he wondered why women had ever been created, as he saw that she had no intention of believing him. "I'm only trying to help you, damn it!" he shouted. "I didn't kill your dad's men!"

Then she did one of those things that had made him wonder before just what went through a woman's mind. In a sudden blot of moonlight he saw the gun lower—saw the tears shining in her eyes. "Oh, Jeff," she said, her voice breaking. "I wish I could believe you."

Jeff lunged at her, unwilling to take any more chances on feminine whims. He pinned her arms to her sides and twisted the gun from her hand. The hound snarled.

"Call off that dog before I blow his head off," Jeff demanded. "Now you listen to me. If I can't talk to you like a man who loves you should talk to you, then I'll talk to you a man's way. We got no time to stand here arguing. Get your dad and call the men."

"I could kill you," she screamed, stamping her feet. "You—!"

"Sorry, darling," Jeff said easily. "Guess there's only one way to handle a stubborn gal like you." He stepped forward, scooped her under one arm and started walking toward the house. Nancy fought and kicked, but in comparison to the blows Jeff had taken tonight her pitiful efforts seemed slight.

Jeff mounted the front porch with one step, hardly noticing the burden he was

carrying. He kicked at the front door and it flew open. With Nancy under his right arm and her gun gripped in his left hand, he faced a startled Milt Agnew.

"You folks are plumb hard to convince," Jeff said, "but I'll convince you if I have to spank the two of you. Newg Tegor is on his way to wipe you out!"

* * *

OLD MILT AGNEW didn't answer, but from the barn a single tongue of flame burst forth and threw a shadow across the big front porch. Far away, from the mouth of the canyon, they heard the sound of horses, coming fast.

"Now," Jeff Rainey said, dropping Nancy to the floor. "Are you going to believe me? Go call your men!"

Milt Agnew looked suddenly old and haggard. His hands trembled slightly. Jeff was puzzled. That wasn't like Agnew. He looked at Nancy. Her eyes were wide.

"Don't just stand there," Jeff said bewilderedly.

"The men aren't here," Nancy said softly. "They all went over to the Flying W to a dance. Old Chico, out there with the cattle, is the only man on the place."

For a second the full import of Nancy's words hung in Jeff's brain. Then they churned into action as flame leapt higher from the barn and a bullet crashed through the front window.

With one sweep Jeff doused the light. He shoved over a heavy oak table and pushed Nancy behind it. Taking two rifles from the rack by the door, he gave one to Agnew and kept one himself. He turned, as he saw Nancy get up from her place behind the overturned table and come to his side.

"Get back there," he ordered.

"Don't be silly," she snapped back. "You don't even know where the ammunition is. Here!" She thrust a box into his hands. Then, with a calm determination, she took a gun from the rack and crouched down in front of a window. Jeff applauded inwardly and prayed that she'd be safe. Old Agnew had settled down into a grim piece of machinery.

Jeff and Milt both saw the shadowy form sneaking low across the open yard toward the barn. The crack of Jeff's rifle jarred crazily through the room and Jeff saw the crouching figure straighten, spin, then fall.

"Why didn't you let me have the first one?" Agnew grumbled.

As if it had been waiting for this signal, hell roared from the line of cottonwoods below the house. Glass showered from the big front windows and bullets screamed from the pillared porch. Ten mounted men broke into the clearing and rode at top speed in the direction of the corrals. Jeff recognized the huge bulk of Tug and saw Tegor's horse. Jeff and Agnew both fired, and the last two horses went on with empty saddles. He saw Nancy calmly aim and fire.

The barn was a solid blur of red now and the darting figures of men were plainly marked in the glare. They must have realized the targets they were making, for the gunfire stopped. In the lull, Jeff glanced at Nancy. The glow from the barn lighted her face and he could see her looking at him. She was smiling.

"You hold 'em here," Jeff said, thinking of the men that had ridden out toward the roundup pens. "I'll go out and give your man a hand." He thought of Tegor's threat to take Nancy. "Whatever you do," he warned, "don't let anyone get near this house."

"Don't worry about us," Agnew said. "You keep toward the upper edge of the fern patch. There's big rocks up there. Give you good cover."

Jeff started to go, then, following a sudden impulse, he went to Nancy's side, picked her up in his arms and kissed her. It was not just a spur-of-the-moment kiss, but a kiss he had dreamed of on long nights alone. He put her down and suddenly felt afraid of her.

For a long minute Nancy looked up at him. From the corner of his eye he saw old Milt Agnew studiously looking in the other direction. Nancy reached up and touched one of Jeff's big hands. "Be careful—darling," she whispered. Jeff went out the back door, the world singing in his ears.

He crossed the back porch noiselessly, clutching his rifle close to his body. Once in the scrub-oak thicket down back of the house, he stopped and took stock of his surroundings. He thought of Milt Agnew and his daughter, fighting it out alone. Old Milt wasn't a bad sort at all. If he had this war off his mind he'd be easy to deal with.

Jeff thought of his homestead, blowing away for lack of water. There was a rattle of gunfire from over the hill and the bawl of startled cattle. Jeff crouched low and ran.

Jeff could see the orange stabs of flame as he topped the rise overlooking the big roundup pens. He spotted the answering fire of the old *vaquero* to the left, from behind a shapeless black mass of rock, leering and sinister in the moonlight. Cautiously he made his way toward that stronghold. He dropped prone on the ground when he was close enough and raised his head enough so his voice would carry.

"Chico—don't shoot," he sad. "I'll give you a hand."

A black shape hurtled from behind a boulder and lit with a crushing thud on Jeff's back. He rolled, trying to see, and felt the hairy arms of Tug closing around his chest. With his one free hand he clawed at the man's face, but the grip around his chest only tightened.

"This time you don't get away," Tug growled in his ear. He tightened his squeeze and Jeff felt the air scream from his lungs. Everything was going black. He tried to roll, but he was paralyzed from the man's tremendous weight and his crushing arms. Faintly he heard a thud and felt Tug's arms relax.

For a little while he lay there, the world blotted out. Then, slowly, he opened his eyes. He saw the Mexican, squatting in the shadows, and saw the dim outline of twin .44's staring him in the face.

"You can point those guns the other way," Jeff said weakly. "Agnew sent me to give you a hand."

"You know," Chico said, lowering the guns, "eet's a fonny teeng. I deedn' know which one to hit on the head."

"I'm glad you didn't hit me," Jeff said admiringly, looking at the sprawled form of Tug. "How you doing?"

"I was do all right," the Mexican answered. "Only four left." As if in answer, four shots blazed from the posts around the corral and lead whined off the face of the rocks. The cattle were milling and bellowing their discontent. Jeff moved closer to Chico. He felt a warm sticky dampness seep from the Mexican's clothes onto his own.

They both fired at the winking points of light down the slope. One man left the protection of his post and made for his horse. Chico dropped him. From the direction of the house the yellow glow from the barn was painting the sky, and red flames crackled their fury, making a jagged pattern along the crest of the knoll.

Jeff raised his head and by craning his neck he could see the barnyard. The big barn was an inferno. In its glow he could see Tegor's remaining men, moving in a semicircle toward the house. *This is it,* he thought. *They're closing in.*

"We gotta go help Agnew and Nancy," he said, tight-lipped.

* * *

CHICO stood up. He started coughing, grabbed his stomach, and sat down. Jeff picked him up and draped him over one shoulder. With his rifle in one hand, steadying Chico with the other, he went on toward the house. The men at the corral broke from cover and rode in for the kill, guns spewing a sheet of death.

Jeff paused behind a boulder. The house still stood, bold against the firelight. It looked like Milt Agnew, Jeff thought. There was still an answering fire from the front windows—slow, sure, and each time the rifles spoke Tegor's men scattered.

But they kept moving in, closer and closer. Jeff was sick with dread and his knees were weak from the crushing pain in his chest and the weight of Chico. Suddenly the guns in the window stopped. Jeff could hear a crashing of furniture and the sound of a fight. Then there was silence, and hoofbeats drummed away in the night.

Jeff never knew how he got to the house. He barely remembered crashing through the back door and swinging at the first shape he saw. He was beating Ludwig crazily against the floor when as from a distance, he heard a chorus of yells shake the night. New guns spoke and he saw Tegor's men run for cover.

"It's the boys," he heard Milt Agnew say. "They're back from the dance, full of red-eye and fightin' like hell!"

"Nancy!" he yelled at Agnew. "Where is she?"

Old Milt clambered from the wreckage in the corner. "My God, man," he whispered hoarsely, "is she gone?"

"Who was in here?" Jeff shouted. "Did you see anyone?"

"Ludwig and Tegor—I don't know who else. They—"

Jeff didn't hear. He vaulted over the front porch rail and landed on the first horse handy.

He rode like a madman through the canyon, thinking only of Nancy in the hands of Newg Tegor. He lashed his horse viciously, little helpless curses choking his throat. Once he thought he saw Tegor, far ahead, riding slowly. He pleaded with his horse for more speed, leaning far out in the saddle as if trying to pull the animal forward.

It was down by the edge of the river that he came upon Tegor. The Box T boss had dismounted and taken a stand behind a tree, sure of his mark. He saw Nancy, white and still, lying on the grass near the riverbank.

As Jeff thundered down the slope Tegor fired. Jeff's horse stumbled and rolled, throwing Jeff free into a clump of manzanita. He lit with a thud, the rifle under him. As he raised the gun the stock broke off in his hands. He could hear Tegor laughing.

Jeff lay still, not daring to move. After a long while Tegor stepped carefully from behind the tree. Still Jeff did not move. Tegor started for his horse, and then, curiosity apparently getting the better of him, he turned and came toward the thicket where Jeff lay.

Jeff waited until Tegor parted the brush above his head, then he uncoiled. His hands found Tegor's gun, twisted it away, and his fingers dug into the man's throat. Tegor kicked like a madman and beat against Jeff's back with his fists. But still Jeff's fingers dug in. Tegor's blows became weaker and weaker. After a long time Jeff realized that Tegor was not struggling any more.

How long he stood there, clutching the man's throat, he never knew. He vaguely remembered letting the limp body drop. Then he ran to where Nancy was standing, sobbing like a little child. He took her in his arms. They were together like that when Milt Agnew and his Lazy A punchers rode up.

* * *

The sun was warm on Jeff Rainey's back the next morning as he sat on his own doorstep. He wasn't surprised when he saw the riders splash across the shallow ford in the river. He recognized Milt Agnew first by his white hair, then, squinting into the sunlight, he saw what he most wanted to see. Nancy was with them. One of the others was the doctor from town.

"Hi, neighbor," Milt Agnew greeted. "How you feeling?"

"Little stiff," Jeff admitted, eyeing Nancy shyly. He noticed that what he had thought was Milt Agnew's white hair was a bandage.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Somebody tried to stick my head through a chair," Agnew chuckled.

"How about Chico?"

"He's all right," Agnew scoffed. "Old coot told me he had six bullets in the same place down in Juarez once, and never felt a one of them."

"What the devil did you bring me way over here for?" the doctor cut in. "I don't see nothing wrong with this jasper."

"Thought maybe you'd like to look him over," Agnew said. "He's a pretty valuable specimen."

Jeff blushed and suddenly wished they would all leave and give him a chance to talk to Nancy. It was easy to say what he wanted when they were alone— Nancy had things to say, too, and she showed impatient indications of doing something about it.

"You can all keep still and let me talk," she said. "I've got some good news too. Jeff," she said, looking at him squarely, "Dad says he'll send the men over to help us build a house when he builds the new barn. And with the water from the river I can have a flower garden—"

Jeff was stammering and coughing.

"Might as well get used to it, son," Milt Agnew said, shaking his head. "She always speaks her mind. Gets her own way, too. Just like her mother."

Nancy swung down lightly from the little sorrel she was riding and came over to Jeff's side. For a second he looked into that upturned face and then decided the devil with her dad, the doctor and anyone else. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Glad you didn't kill me?" Jeff asked.

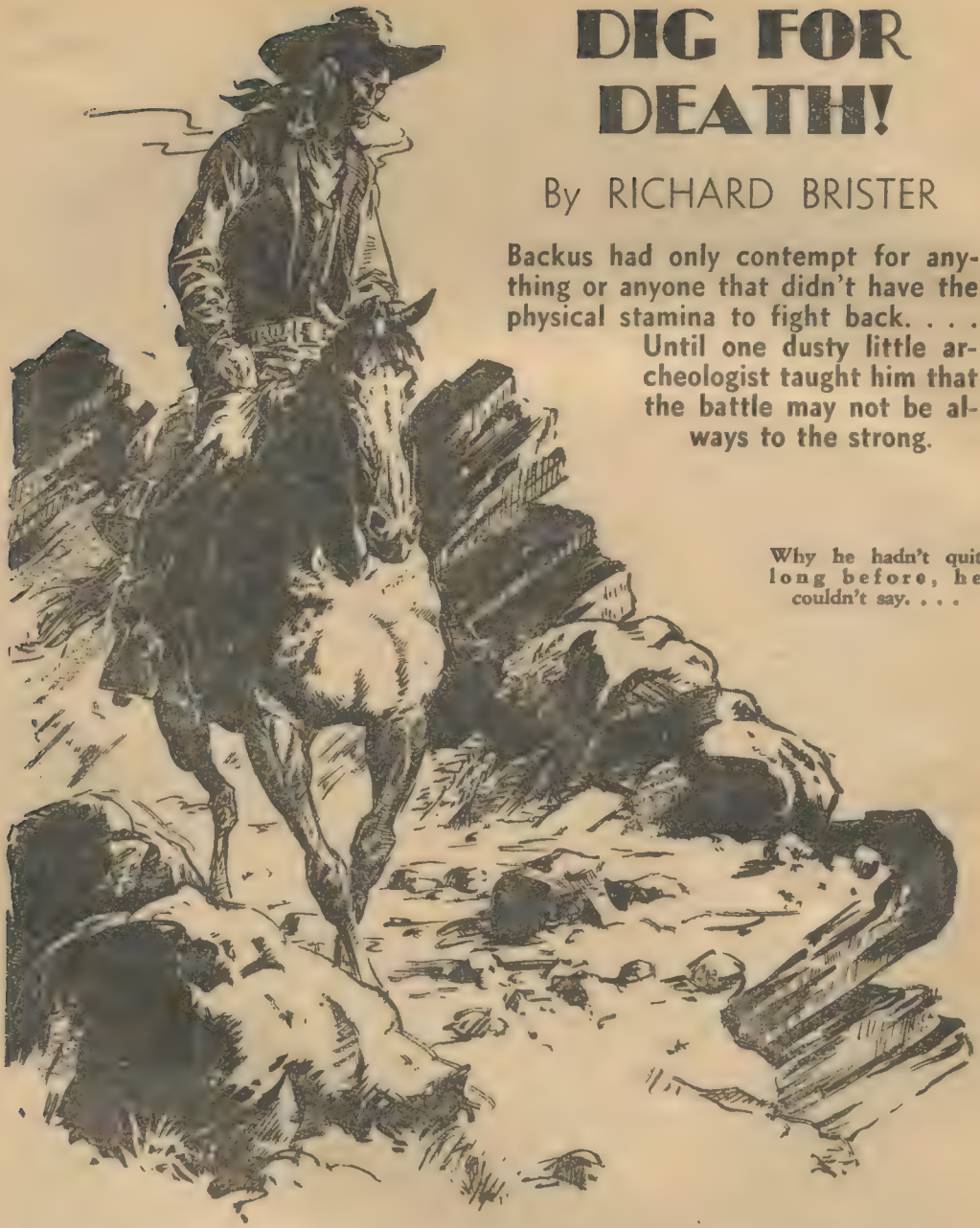
"*Mmmm,*" Nancy answered.

"Wheee!" the little doctor chortled. "That kid don't need no doctor. But by skittle, Agnew, you sure look like you do!"

DIG FOR DEATH!

By RICHARD BRISTER

Backus had only contempt for anything or anyone that didn't have the physical stamina to fight back. . . . Until one dusty little archeologist taught him that the battle may not be always to the strong.



Why he hadn't quit long before, he couldn't say. . . .

BACKUS had a hideout canyon where he holed in, sometimes for a month at a stretch, when life as other men lived it got too unhealthy for him.

He could just make out the tiny gully that led down to his canyon now. He had to lift his gaunt six-foot-four frame high in the stirrups and shade his narrow eyes from the setting sun. Even then it took some high-powered concentrating, but when he saw what he wanted, he chuckled hoarsely and gave the sorrel a kick on the rump.

"Snort, you long-legged loafer, and get goin'. Ain't you got sense enough t' know home when you see it?"

Home. . . The word made a warm place in his mind, even while the sorrel whinnied with fright and kicked up on its hind legs

in a half-hearted attempt to unseat him. Home. He drove his spurs deep in the horse's sides, and leaned forward as the animal settled into a leg-stretching lope.

"Run, you fool," Backus chuckled. He watched the long ears dart back. It was the sorrel's way of showing anger. Backus spurred him again out of pure devilment and his own high spirits. "A lot of fight you got left, ain't you?" he grunted disgustedly.

Backus had a way of judging every living thing. There were animals—including the human—of only two types. As Backus saw it, there were creatures who fought and there were creatures who didn't.

Backus, of course, was a creature who fought. For as far back as he could remember he had been engaged in an unending conflict with the world and the things in it.

He gave a loving pat to the low-slung Colt on his hip. The stock was notched out of all recognition. Backus had long ago quit notching his gun when he killed a man. When he had passed his fortieth birthday, he had decided to pass up the habit as being too youthful and vain.

The thought of his age set him chuckling hoarsely again. It was not in the cards for a man who had lived all his life by killing, still to be around on his forty-fifth birthday. But the owlhoot trail had been good to Bo Backus. Cached up ahead, in the canyon, was a railroad strongbox with enough money in it to keep him well fed and well clothed for the rest of his days.

He pulled the tiring sorrel to the right, where the gully's mouth beckoned. Why he had not quit long ago he couldn't quite say, unless perhaps the excitement and the notoriety had gotten into his blood, down the years. Bo Backus was a name that commanded fear, and a brand of respect, in every bunkhouse and in every saloon throughout the cow-country.

There wasn't one thing more he could ask of life, except possibly friends. But he dismissed even that thought with a snort from his long, beaked nose and a disgusted shrug of his shoulders. If he'd had friends, down the years, Backus wouldn't be here now.

An owlhooter can't afford to have friends, because sooner or later one of them's going to cross you. And you can only afford to get crossed once, in Backus' business—once, to teach you never to trust another human being again.

When Backus was twenty, leading his first gang of owlhooters, one of his men had tried to stir up the others to revolt against him. When Backus had got wind of it, he had shot the man between the eyes at point-blank range, drawing and triggering without warning.

He had led many gangs since, but always keeping aloof from the men, trusting nobody, loyal to nothing.

And when the law threatened to catch up with him, as it had last week after the haul they'd made on the bank in Fellsboro, he'd thought nothing of walking out cold on his men. Six times in the past fifteen years he had hightailed it alone to hole out in his canyon. Six times he had left up to a dozen gang members behind. Few of them lived today. Backus grinned. Did it matter?

Bo Backus could always get more men, when the urge to pillage and kill returned in him. Men were dirt-cheap. All things were dirt-cheap to Backus, except only one. He was the most hard-shelled cynic alive, but one thing he did believe in—preserving the life of Bo Backus.

The sweat-lathered sorrel slowed to the down-dip of the gully, placing stiff forelegs out as it picked hard ground among scattered dirt patches and gravelly rubble. Backus sat limp in the saddle. Four days of constant riding lay behind him. He was safe now, he knew, and the lifetime habit of keeping constantly alert, on the lookout for danger, sloughed off him. It was good to relax, watching the canyon's broad floor swing into view around the last bend of the gully. It was good to think of the soft days ahead of him, of the speckled trout to be taken from the gurgling stream in the canyon, of long days to be spent flat on his back at the stream-side, just lazing. And he could count his money. He—

"Who-aa, boy!"

Backus pulled rein, speaking in a soft whisper directly into the sorrel's cocked-back ears. The beast snorted and was about to whinny with fright, but Backus' huge fist suddenly reached out like a striking snake and clubbed the horse on the cheek. It was a blow the horse knew, and the animal threw back its head in protest, but kept dutifully silent.

Backus was staring bleakly downtrail, to

where a small campfire burned on the sandy floor of the canyon. Of *his* canyon!

* * *

FARNLEY was not in the habit of leaving campfires untended. It was a very bad habit, he knew, especially during the dry season. But he was still so excited over his discovery that he had gotten up while still munching his makeshift lunch of flapjacks and bacon, and returned to the cave.

The cave was upstream quite a distance, and it was at the very floor of the canyon. It had been there several thousand years ago. Of that Farnley was quite certain. Though perhaps, back then, it had not been uncovered. It had taken the ceaseless digging of this swift stream to gnaw into the bowels of the earth and lay bare her secrets. Farnley was quite pleased with the stream's work.

When he came into the cave, he saw his pickaxe and his hammer and chisel just where he had left them. His shovel was leaning against the cave wall, and on the smooth floor, still partly encased in the black loam which the stream had deposited around it, was the Incan jug.

Farnley knew it was Incan. He had engraved on his mind a picture of just such a jug, with a small piece missing, back in the museum at the university. There was no such jug intact today. Or rather, there had not been, till he had discovered this one.

His bony hands trembled, and his fragile one hundred twenty pounds shook as if with the palsy. He was prepared to take weeks, if necessary, to get this jug back to Philadelphia without allowing any mishap to destroy it. Its value he couldn't certainly state, but it would probably run around twenty thousand.

He took out his jackknife—the one last year's class had given to him during the June commencement exercises—and opened the small blade. Tenderly, hardly daring to breathe, he inserted the tip of the blade between the lip of the jug and the surrounding hard loam. The loam seemed to want to flake away freely. Farnley exerted no more pressure on it than seemed necessary.

Somewhere outside a stone rattled, and he heard it go leaping downward and plop into the smooth-flowing stream. Farnley pulled his bony hand back from his precious jug and mopped his thin forehead. Sometimes he wished he had brought along one of the young men from his class for a companion this summer. He was a nervous old man. And now, of all times, he had to start imagining things.

Stones do rattle, always have rattled down hills and plopped into streams. As an archeologist, he should well know that, and not let his nerves trick him into the silly belief that some active force was behind that stone's rattling. After all, who could be out there?

This time he was a trifle more clever. He propped his elbow against the floor of the cave, and thus was able to hold his knife-hand steady as he shelled loam away from the jug's round surface. A great layer of the soft stuff fell away from the jug at once, and beneath it, Farnley's mild eyes could begin to discern some scrawled, ancient inscription.

"Bless me," he muttered. "Lord bless me!" And again his bony hands shook as if palsied.

Behind Farnley, then, a rude voice shattered the cave's dank silence.

"I'll bless you, all right, you bag-eared old coyote. Come out of there, now. Come out of there stretchin'."

Farnley sat like a stone. He could feel his heart thump his thin ribs like a bell-clapper. He swung about, scrambling shakily to his feet. Luckily, he had not been in bodily contact with the jug when the voice called from behind him. It lay intact at his feet as he craned toward the cave-mouth, trying to make out the man who had so rudely called to him.

He was more than a little peeved, and he said in a voice cracked with age, "Keep a civil tongue, you. If you had a grain of common sense to your system, you'd be more careful how you go surprising people."

"Why, you locoed old fool!" A towering, gaunt figure appeared from the side of the cave-mouth, filling the entrance. The man had a face like a hawk, hard black eyes that shone like an eagle's, and a voice, Farnley decided, that could be likened only to thunder.

The big man seemed in an absolute rage about something. Was in a rage, rather, Farnley amended, starting back in fright.

The big man was pointing a long-barreled revolver at him.

"Here, now." Farnley waved both bony hands at him. "Put that gun up. It'll hurt somebody."

The big man sneered. "That's the general idea, maybe." He came walking toward Farnley, jerking the gun so that the professor backed into the cave before him. Farnley was careful even now, though, to step nimbly over the jug on the floor.

As the big man came on, threatening to put his high-heeled boots down on it, Farnley yelled frantically, "Careful, man. That jug. Don't—" Seeing the futility of such tactics against this hulking moron, the professor resorted to a more human appeal. "It's worth twenty thousand dollars," he cried hoarsely.

The big man sneered. "That thing?" He brought his foot back, seemed on the point of kicking the jug, then halted. "Twenty thousand?" he repeated after Farnley. "What're you talkin' about, Pop?"

"If you'll put that gun down for a minute, I'll tell you," Farnley said crisply. "And my name isn't Pop. I'm Professor Horace Farnley. I'm an archeologist."

The tall man frowned. "Arche—what?"

"An archeologist. An explorer of lost civilizations. In simple words—that jug you nearly ruined just now once belonged to the Incas. That's an old Indian tribe of thousands of years ago. It's not broken, so naturally it's worth a great deal of money."

The tall man still apparently couldn't get it. "Twenty thousand!" he mumbled. "Who to, is it worth that kind of money?"

"Practically any museum you can mention," the professor said acidly. "And now if you'll put that gun down, and step carefully as you're leaving, I'll get back to work on it."

* * *

THE tall man took a while, letting the professor's words sink in. He wore an expression that mixed patience with simmering anger. "You still don't seem to get the idea," he said slowly. "There's no need of you workin' on that thing any more. You ain't gonna be leavin' the canyon."

Farnley said, after a moment, "If that's an attempt at humor, my good fellow, it's not very funny."

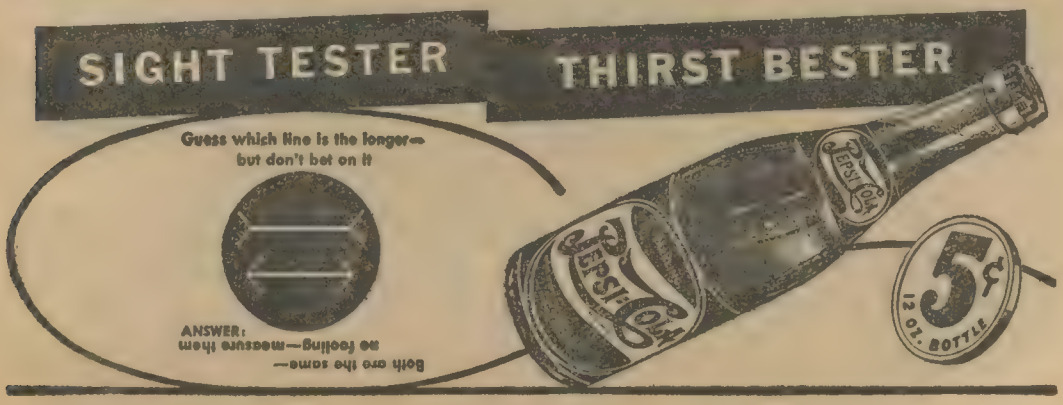
The big man put his gun in his holster. Farnley realized that the nonchalant gesture was to indicate the man's contempt for him. He listened unbelievingly as the low voice rumbled on, filling the cave:

"Maybe you ain't heard of me, Pop. I'm Bo Backus."

"Are you?" Farnley shrugged. His logical mind had decided by now that he was dealing with a desperado. No other man would turn out in such a godforsaken spot as this, traveling alone. He had heard of Bo Backus. Who hadn't? The name was a legend, all over the country.

But some stubborn twist in the professor's makeup tempted him to pretend ignorance of the name. Why feed the stupid dolt's vanity? he reasoned. "And who might that be?" he asked gently.

The big man grunted. "Never mind. All that means anything to you right now is, you stumbled into my hideout. Maybe not a-purpose. But I can't afford to turn you loose now. So I reckon you'll have to give up archeologizin'." He seemed to consider the word very funny. He laughed, the great



booming lift of it seeming to rock the cave.

Farnley was too old a man, and too philosophical, to know physical fear. He had lived his expectancy and more, as he saw it. But he cast a plaintive eye toward the floor. That jug should be adorning the university museum. It would make an ideal valedictory gift from Horace Farnley. The thought of allowing this hulking brute to stand between him and such an exalted objective was appalling to him.

Here if ever, he thought, was a chance to validate his existence, to use the wits and the brains he had nurtured throughout a life spent in study. Were those brains of no use to him now, pitted against a brute intelligence armed with a simple invention of steel and springs, capable of projecting lead through the air at a speed to kill?

He would try, he decided. It was a crusade, he thought, outwitting Bo Backus, and getting a priceless gift to historians back east where it might do some real good. But he needed a line of action, now. He cast about in his agile mind for it.

There was one thought which somehow stayed uppermost in his brain. He couldn't stop seeing, in his mind's eye, the quick way Backus' foot had stopped when the big man had heard the jug's value.

Farnley said slowly, "I'm an old man, Backus. Your gun doesn't scare me, too much. Seems a shame, though, about the jug. Isn't it a practice, among you Western men dealing in death, to grant a doomed man one last request?"

"Maybe." Backus spat, looking at him. He was waiting.

"I told you the truth about that jug's value," said the professor. "I wish you'd do me the simple favor of getting it out of here when you leave. Take it to some museum. In any big city. And whatever you do, don't break it. They'll pay you well for it."

The big man stared at the jug. He seemed to be giving Farnley's words serious thought. Then he sneered.

"Fat chance I'd have t' peddle that thing. My pelt's worth more'n your jug. So—"

"Use an intermediary," the professor suggested.

"Inter—huh?"

"You must have some friend who could sell the jug for you."

Bo Backus threw back his head. The cave rocked with his booming laughter.

"I wouldn't trust my own mother with twenty thousand of my money."

The professor sighed. "That's too bad. Understand, my only wish is to see it safely delivered to some good museum. But even from your standpoint, it must be annoying—the thought of so much cash value unrealized."

Backus' brow furrowed. "It'd be a nice haul, at that." His black eyes narrowed. "How'd you find this place, Pop? Was you ridin'? I didn't see no horse out yonder."

Farnley said, "I came by canoe. I followed the river as far as I could, portage, and came on the rest of the way afoot. Why?"

"Just wondered," said Backus.

* * *

FARNLEY stared at him. Actually, the purpose of Backus' question was to learn if anyone else knew about his hideout. The assurance that no one did seemed to take a great weight off the huge man's shoulders.

Now he said, dryly, "I may not kill you right away, Pop. First place, you're harmless. Second, I'm holin' in quite a while, and I need somebody t' talk to." He paused, watching the effect of his words on the professor's face.

Farnley smiled thinly. "Yes?"

The big man scratched his head. "Cool one, ain't you? In the third place, I figure there may be some way t' cash in on that jug. I aim to do some thinkin' about it. Meantime, you can be doin' some more prospectin'. Might be a heap more o' that stuff hereabouts."

Farnley said carefully, "If you really mean to take it out, I'll be glad to keep on hunting. My life means nothing, compared with an ageless masterpiece like this. And you're quite right. There may be many more like it."

His eyes were shining and his breath came fast. He hoped Backus would ascribe his excitement to the prospect of digging for more ancient pottery. Actually, Farnley's excitement stemmed from having won the first round in his battle of wits against Backus. He had gained time, at least. A little psychology, subtly applied, had won him at least a reprieve.

And he had been lying, when he told Backus that he had come alone to the canyon. He had no canoe upstream. He had come to this place with an exploration party of ten archeologists, and, bent upon conducting some private research in this likely spot, had stayed alone. The party was due back to pick up Farnley on June 25th. Three weeks from today.

Three weeks. If he could somehow hold out for those twenty-one days, he might still cause a stir in his chosen profession. He *had* to get that jug out safely, he told himself with an angry toss of his thin shoulders.

* * *

Days passed during which the professor toiled in the cave, wielding pickaxe and hammer and chisel under the watchful eye of Bo Backus. A companion piece to his one big find was not forthcoming. Perhaps priceless relics were daily crumbling beneath his tools. He knew how thin were his chances of finding another object in a state of preservation to match that of the other.

He did not mention the thought to Backus.

"Patience, man," he would protest when the big man prodded at him. "That's the one and only all-important virtue in my business."

"Not in mine, it ain't," Backus growled. He patted the gun on his hip. "My line calls for quick action. I had enough of this puttering around." He kicked at the tiny rubble of stone and gravel which Farnley had produced during two and a half weeks' labor. "You'd starve t' death diggin' ditches."

"I'm *not* digging ditches," Farnley reminded. "If I hurry, I'll ruin any relic I may find before I can tell that I've dug down to it."

Four days, he was thinking. *If I can just hold his interest for four more days.*

All that day, Backus was ugly. That night, on his back by the fire, his head on his saddle and his gun underneath it, the outlaw issued an ultimatum.

"I'm fed up on this, Pop. I gave you a chance. You made a bungle out of it."

Farnley's heart thumped.

"Tomorrow," Backus went on, "will be the last day of diggin'. If you don't find nothin'—" He made a suggestive gesture, dragging his forefinger across his throat. "I hope you try runnin' for it. Be sorta fun, trackin' you down. An' I can use the practice."

Despite himself, Farnley shuddered. "You gave me a chance, you say. I don't see—"

The big man broke in. "If you'd dug up a couple more of them jugs, enough to jack up the kitty around fifty thousand, it mighta been worth my while to make a deal with you.

"I'd let you go, for that kind of money. The way I look at it, this hideout's worth fifty thousand. An' not worth a nickel, with two men knowin' about it."

He rolled over, and in less than ten minutes was snoring. Farnley lay staring up at the stars. A hopeless feeling flooded his aged body.

Four days. So close, he had come. And now to—

Flame flickered brightly as the fire sputtered and cracked beside him. He stared at it, and some of that bright flame came into his eyes. It was hours later before he, too, was snoring. . . .

* * *

AT FOUR in the afternoon of the following day, Farnley suddenly peered intently into the pit he had chiseled in the cave floor, and yelled with shrill delight.

"Lord bless me. Backus! I think I've found something!" Backus came running and squinted down at the pit. Farnley said, "Careful, now. Careful. Don't disturb it." Gently, with loving tenderness, he pried with his chisel, finally dislodging a crude earthen bowl from the surrounding substance.

Farnley scraped most of the foreign material off it, then held it aloft for Backus' inspection. His thin hands were shaking. "Here," he said. "Hold it. I don't trust myself with it."

Backus took it. His eyes focused on it with skepticism. "You mean a crude thing like this is worth somethin'?"

"More than the other," said Farnley. "It's older, man. Much older!"

Backus twisted it this way and that. Beginning to feel some of Farnley's excite-

ment, he gingerly set it down on the cave floor.

"What would you assay it at, Pop?"

Farnley put his chin in his hands. "If anyone offered me less than forty thousand for that—in such amazing condition—I'd call him a highway robber."

"Call me one, then," Backus said. "I ain't goin' t' offer you nothin'."

His eyes shone, and a crafty look came on his hawk-like features. His hand moved toward the gun at his side.

"Sixty thousand in all, hey? Not a bad haul. Not so dumb, was I, lettin' you—Hey!" he roared, "put that thing down!"

Farnley had moved like a cat. He stood now, brandishing the bowl in front of his chest, staring balefully past Backus' six-shooter into the outlaw's eyes.

"Shoot," he said in a voice gone taut and high with emotion. "What's holding your hand?"

While Backus watched, slack-jawed, the professor walked backward out of the cave. Backus' greedy eyes followed, focused upon the bowl. Then he was coming out, cursing like a madman.

Holding the bowl in one hand, the professor reached in his pocket and took out his chisel. He paused where the path to the cave fell away in a sheer drop of twenty feet to the jagged rocks down at the stream-side.

Backus came within five feet of him and jerked the gun at him. "Put that thing down," he snarled. "I ain't foolin'!"

"Neither am I," the professor said tightly. "Go on. Pull the trigger. I knew you meant to doublecross me. Here's your chance, Backus." His voice took on a gurgling, choked note. "And mine to cross you, you—you hulking moron!"

He flung the bowl away from him in an impassioned gesture. It sailed in a high arc and went hurtling downward.

Backus gaped. He could not tear his greedy eyes from it. This spectacular unreasoning destruction of forty thousand dollars pulled him with magnet-like force to the brink of the small cliff.

Farnley had counted on the insatiable greed of the man to produce just such a reaction. The professor chose this moment to strike. He struck with fury born of desperation.

Brandishing his sharp chisel like a knife, he ran forward. Backus was still watching, awe-struck, as the bowl shattered into a thousand pieces on the rocks below. The chisel dug, gnawed like a live thing, at his back, and reflex sent the huge man hurtling forward. He scrambled a moment, roaring with rage and fright while he tried to maintain his footing. Then, abruptly, he toppled out of Farnley's sight.

His gun, forgotten in this moment of panic, flew out of his groping hand and landed near Farnley. The professor picked it up. He walked to the cliff face and peered over.

He was immensely pleased with what he saw.

"Your leg's broken, eh? Now that's a shame, Backus."

Below him the tall man reared up on an elbow, shaking one huge fist in rage and frustration.

The professor smiled at him. "When my friends arrive, we'll be taking you out, Backus. I presume the law will know how to deal with you."

Backus glared up like a huge trapped bird. His twisted leg moved under him. He winced, grimacing with pain.

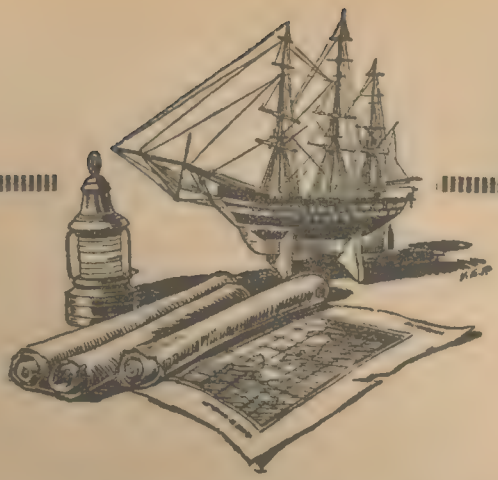
"I've got money hid here, Pop. You've lost out bad on that bowl. I'll make it up to you, if—"

"My dear fellow, I have eyes, you know. I've seen you haunting the spot where your money is buried, looking like a small boy who's been at his mother's jam. The authorities will have to decide what to do with that money.

"Besides," he went on speculatively, "I'll get a sizable reward for your capture, won't I? And as for the jug, that was no loss. I molded that jug myself, last night, while you slept. I baked it in the fire, and planted it in the cave, so I could 'discover' it today. You owe me nothing on that account, my dear fellow."

Bo Backus looked beaten. And for the first time in his life, he felt beaten.

What most enraged him was the thought of being outdone by such a harmless-looking old duffer. Pop didn't look like he had an ounce of fight in him. And Pop had no weapons to speak of, Backus thought miserably—unless you wanted to call a home-made mud bowl a weapon!



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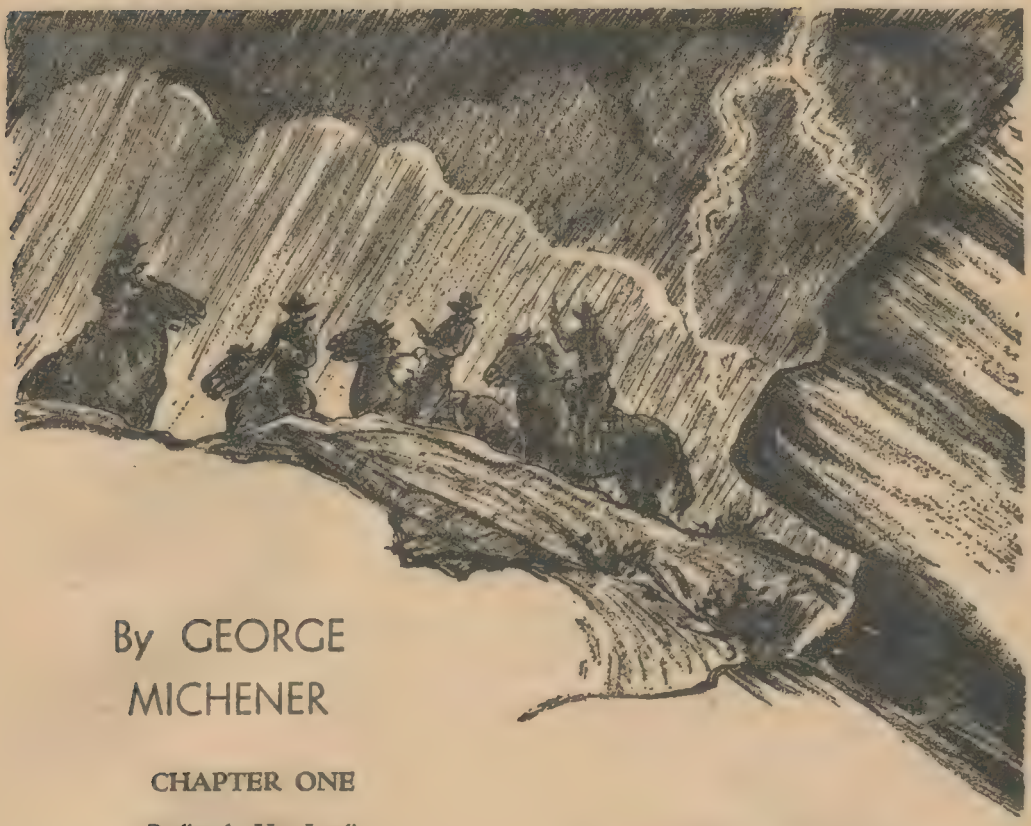


By GEORGE MICHENER

CHAPTER ONE

Redhead—Hot Lead!

THUNDERHEADS deepened the evening twilight and piled the sky with their slow-tumbling masses. Lightning flickered and a gusty wind soughed along the pine-furred ridges. A lone raindrop splattered insolently upon Lem Fiddy's upturned countenance.

"She's comin'," he said. "Maybe it'll give us a chance—"

"Listen!" said the Utah Kid. "Hear that?"

Hoofbeats sounded, drew closer. Lem glanced desperately at the rock walls which rose on three sides. "We would have to run into a blind canyon like this!"

"Get ready!" The Kid slid out a gun.

The two riders waited, holding their horses quiet. The thump of hoofs was loud now. Horsemen jogged by the brush-choked mouth of the canyon and went on without pausing.

Lem drew a long breath. "Missed us! Think they'll be back?"

"Sure they will. They know we're cornered here somewhere."

"It's beginnin' to rain. Maybe when the storm hits it'll give us a chance to slip out."

"We'll shoot our way out!" the Kid snarled.

Lem gave solemn consideration to his under-sized companion. The Kid was nine-

Lem Fiddy swore all he wanted in the embattled valley was a job—and maybe a chance to be near a certain brown-eyed girl. . . . But when everyone from the sheriff on down to Masboy's man-for-breakfast gunmen planted the killer sign on him, Lem decided there was nothing for a fightin' Fiddy to do but declare a one-man war!

RIDES TO WAR! ★

The Kid charged down the slope, a water-streaming, lightning-illumined figure of glory. . . .

SMASHING NOVELETTE OF A LONE-HAND FEUDIST

teen, or maybe twenty years old. He had black eyes and a wide, tough mouth. "I wish," said Lem, "you wasn't so bloodthirsty. Why'd you have to be so quick on the shoot when those fellers tried to stop us back at the Pass?"

"That's my business—Eagle-beak."

Lem rubbed his most prominent feature. "It's a Fiddy nose," he said gently. "All the Fiddys had good noses."

"Fiddy! Now ain't that a name?"

"It's a good name," Lem said quietly.

Lem was a few years older than the Kid. The Kid sized up his rawboned frame and stared hard into his mild blue eyes. Then he shrugged. "All right," he agreed sullenly, "it's a good name. Who cares? We're in this together, and we'll have to pull out of it together."

Lem nodded soberly. "Looks that way. Why you suppose those fellers wanted to stop us? They wasn't the law?"

"No," said the Kid, "there wasn't a badge in the bunch." Suddenly he laughed. "Eagle-beak, you're dumb."

"I'm smart enough to know when I'm in a hole. Who was the red-headed feller you almost plugged?"

"I don't know. I never saw any of that bunch before. I wish now," the Kid added viciously, "I really had tried to plug him, instead of just liftin' his hat!"

Lem sighed and turned his attention to the gathering storm.

After a moment's silence, the Kid said slowly, "Maybe you know who he was—the red-headed gent."

"No," said Lem. "I told you I was a stranger here."

"Yeah." For an instant the Kid's eyes held suspicion.

Then there was a sizzling glare of lightning and a tooth-jolting crash of thunder. "Here she comes!" Lem yelled.

* * *

THE RAIN hit with a splash and whipped across the ground in an opaque, wind-driven sheet. Lem pointed toward the canyon entrance, and the Kid nodded and urged his horse forward.

The two pushed through the tangle of brush which had concealed them and emerged in the gorge beyond. Lem squinted against the alternate blackness and glare of the storm. "I don't see nothing of 'em," he said hopefully. "Maybe they gave up the hunt."

The Kid put his hand to his holster. "Follow me!" he ordered, and charged down the gorge, a gun-flourishing, water-streaming, lightning-illumined figure of glory.

Lem spurred his heavy-gaited Ambler horse and followed, less spectacularly.

The Kid, fifty yards ahead, gave a sudden shout of warning and discharged his gun. There was a chorus of answering shouts and a ragged volley of gunfire. Thunder pealed and lightning flashed. The Kid's shout changed to a high-pitched rebel yell of defiance.

Lem hunched down in the saddle. "Come on, Ambler!" he prayed.

The horse was rawboned like his master—not ornamental, but durable. He lengthened out his hammer-head and scattered mud by the shovelful. Gunflame stabbed at Lem, and bullets zinged by. The Kid, still screeching his rebel yell, raced on ahead.

The Kid swung his horse abruptly and sent it scrambling up a break in the gorge bank. Lem plowed after him. Fifteen minutes later the two halted in the cover of brush by a creek. They heard no sound of pursuit.

Lem looked at the sky. "Storm's about done," he said. "Think they'll try to track us?"

The Kid's head was bent forward in an attitude of deep thought. "Maybe," he murmured. "Maybe not."

"I'd feel better," said Lem, "if we'd keep travelin'."

The Kid straightened. "Come on," he said harshly.

They moved upstream, sticking close to the creek brush. The rain ceased and the darkness of night settled down. Presently Lem said, "Let's head down into the valley."

"Why?"

"Because I'm wet. I want to find a dry place to sleep. This creek is just takin' us back into the hills."

"Whose place you want to find?" The Kid's voice was sharp.

"Anybody's." Lem grinned faintly. "Just so they don't start shootin' at me."

The Kid pointed. "See that ridge? We'll

follow along that. I'll find you a place to sleep."

They left the creek and took to the ridge slope. The ridge flattened gradually to a rolling highland, black-patched with brush and cut by numerous small gullies.

The Kid wasn't riding as erectly as he generally did. Lem saw his hand move to his side, with a pressing motion. "I reckon," said Lem, "we'd better stop."

The Kid halted. "What's the matter?"

Lem rode up close. "How bad are you hit?"

The Kid braced both hands on the pommel. "Not bad," he murmured. "Just a scratch. It's about stopped bleedin' now."

"Get off your horse and we'll have a look."

The Kid shook his head. "Then I might not feel like gettin' on again. Don't worry—I'll make it."

"Make it to where?"

The Kid put his hand on his gun. "To Masboy's, Eagle-beak."

Lem nodded blankly. "Where's that?"

"I don't know for sure. We've missed the trail. It's somewhere at this end of the valley." The Kid's gaze was searching and unsatisfied. "You ain't figurin' to double-cross me, Eagle-beak?"

"How? And why should I?"

"From now on," said the Kid grimly, "you go ahead and I'll follow. And keep to a walk!"

They went on, more slowly now. Once Lem looked behind him, and he saw the Kid gripping the saddle horn with both hands.

The Kid straightened. "I can still pull a gun," he warned.

Presently they struck a narrow trail, and it led them toward a small ranch house with two lighted windows showing.

"Masboy's?" asked Lem.

"I reckon not. Masboy has an outfit. That ain't much more'n a homesteader's layout."

"They'll know how to get to Masboy's."

The Kid nodded. "We'll ask 'em."

They rode up before the house, and the Kid called a halt. He had his gun out. "You'll do the askin'!" he said grimly. "And don't try to go in the house. Just ask the way to Masboy's. And talk so I can hear every word you say! Leave your horse here and walk slow!"

"Sure," said Lem. He dismounted, reached up swiftly and caught the Kid's gun-hand.

* * *

THE KID was too weak to struggle. Lem stuffed the gun under his shirt, pulled the boy from the saddle, and held him cradled in his arms. He started toward the house.

The door opened and a small dog rushed forth. A man stepped to the doorway. "Who's that?" he called tremulously.

Lem stood still while the little dog snapped and growled. "Me. Lem Fiddy," he answered.

"Who?"

"Call off your tiger. I got a man here that's hurt."

A girl came to the doorway. "Zip!" she cried. "Come here!"

The dog, still making threats, retreated as Lem strode forward. The man, gaunt and whiskery, peered intently as Lem moved into the dim radius of lamplight. "Who'd you say you was?" he inquired.

The girl said composedly, "Get out of the way, Uncle John, and let him in. Zip! You be quiet!"

Lem entered the house, glanced about him, and deposited the Kid on a worn horse-hair sofa. "I'll need warm water and bandages," he said.

The girl nodded and left the room.

The gaunt man slowly closed the door and stood with his back to it while Lem removed the Kid's shirt and examined the long bullet-furrow in his side. The dog came and smelled Lem's boots, then yawned and sat down.

The girl returned with a basin of warm water and clean rags. She gazed at the wound, and said competently, "That's not so bad. I'll clean it. You help when I'm ready to bandage him."

She was about eighteen, brown-eyed, and very serious as she performed her task. Lem stepped aside and watched her with solemn admiration. The Kid remained quiet; his eyes were closed and his cheeks were colorless.

The girl folded a compress. "Now, if you'll help—" she said.

Lem came forward. Together, he and the girl bandaged the Kid and laid him back on the sofa.

The girl stood erect and said, "I'll get a bed ready for him and make some coffee while you take off his wet clothes."

"Wait a minute, Cathy!" The gaunt man pointed at the Kid. "How'd he get plugged?"

"Some fellers wanted to stop us—and we didn't stop." Lem spoke to the girl: "I don't know who they were, but the law ain't after us. That's the truth!"

The man said, "Was one of 'em red-headed? Big and freckled?"

Lem nodded. "That's right. He seemed to be the ramrod. He—"

"D'you hear that, Cathy?"

The girl glanced at the Kid, then at Lem again. There wasn't much warmth in her brown eyes now. Lem suddenly remembered he had forgotten to remove his hat. Red-faced, he said awkwardly, "I'm Lem Fiddy. I come from over on the—"

The gaunt man interrupted, "Cathy, you go out in the kitchen!"

The girl hesitated, then turned and left.

The man moved quickly to Lem's side and stared down at the Kid. "You've got to get him out of here!" he said. "Both of you!"

Lem shook his head. "He can't ride. He's lost too much blood."

"Are they still after you?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"You've got to get him out of here!" The man gauged Lem with narrowed eyes, looked swiftly toward the kitchen, then spoke softly. "I'm Jack Hollister. Masboy's place is the other side of the ridge."

The Kid opened his eyes. "How far?"

"Four miles."

"I can ride," said the Kid.

"He can't," said Lem.

"Then how about a buckboard? He can stand that."

The Kid said, "Hollister, give me a gun. I'll settle this argument!"

The Kid started to rise, and Lem pushed him back on the sofa. "All right," Lem agreed reluctantly, "we'll get the buckboard."

Lem accompanied Hollister to the barn. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "You know him?" he asked.

Hollister nodded. "I knew who he was the minute you came in. I didn't think there'd be two of you, though."

"For awhile," said Lem, "I didn't think there'd even be one of us. That red-headed feller meant business."

"That's Jake Scanlon, Hart's foreman. He's the one you got to watch out for. If you get him out of the way, it'll— Well, it ain't none of my business. Masboy'll give you the setup. All I do is go along and mind my own business and ask no questions. That's the best way."

Hollister opened the barn door. "Just the same," he continued, "Sid Masboy ought to 'a knowed better than to telegram for him. Why didn't he write the Kid a letter? He mighta knowed the telegrapher would talk. As it is, the whole valley knowed the Kid was comin'. Well, it's none of my business. I just keep my mouth shut and don't favor neither Sid Masboy nor Hart. That's *my* way!"

"It's the best way," said Lem.

"It's the only way for a man that's got a niece to think of, and if he ain't handy with a gun like you gents. Just the same, if Sid Masboy wants any little favor done, he knows who to come to—I ain't mentionin' no names."

CHAPTER TWO

Masboy's Mountains

LEM AND HOLLISTER harnessed a team and hitched it to a buckboard. "Is there a road to Masboy's?" Lem asked.

"You can't take the road," said Hollister. "Scanlon'll be on the lookout for you. The best way would be over the ridge." Hollister thought a minute. "I tell you," he said finally. "I'll go along and drive—then I can bring the team back. I guess now you know you can trust me."

Lem nodded. "I ain't worried a bit," he said unconcernedly.

They drove up to the yard, and Lem and Hollister entered the house. "I want a few words with Cathy," said Hollister.

Lem lifted the Kid from the sofa and took him out to the buckboard. The Kid said, "Give me back my gun, Eagle-beak."

Lem shook his head. "No more shootin' tonight. I've got my belly full." He went to his horse, mounted, and led the Kid's horse back to the buckboard.

Hollister came from the house, picked up the reins and climbed onto the spring seat.

The girl appeared in the lighted doorway.

Hollister waggled a finger at her. "Now remember, Cathy, if Scanlon shows up, you don't know nothin'. All you know is, these two gents forced me to hitch up and drive off with 'em."

The girl remained silent.

The buckboard left the yard and rolled over soggy ground where there was no discernible trail. Lem, leading the Kid's horse, followed close to the tailboard.

Hollister swung around in the seat and spoke uneasily, "You heard what I told Cathy about you two forcin' me to drive. Well, if Scanlon comes up with us, that's got to be my story. I can't afford to get mixed up in this business. I got Cathy to think of."

Lem made no comment.

"Women," went on Hollister, "don't understand things. Cathy gets funny ideas sometimes. I don't talk much around Cathy. You understand how it is."

"Sure," said Lem. "I'm understandin' better all the time."

The buckboard took a circuitous route among the brush patches. It skirted the end of a low ridge and moved out onto good grassland. Presently, Lem felt solid ground under him.

Hollister said, "This is a wagon trail Masboy uses sometimes. It'll take you to town. It'll take you to Eden Hart's place, too, if you turn left at the fork about two miles behind us."

The trail ran up to a bluff, followed its base until the bluff dropped away, then turned into the neck of a small timber-rimmed basin. Hollister halted the team and pointed to lights ahead.

"There you are. That's Sid Masboy's place."

The Kid said irascibly, "Keep movin'! I want to get there!"

"Now wait!" said Hollister. "Someone's comin'. Hear that?"

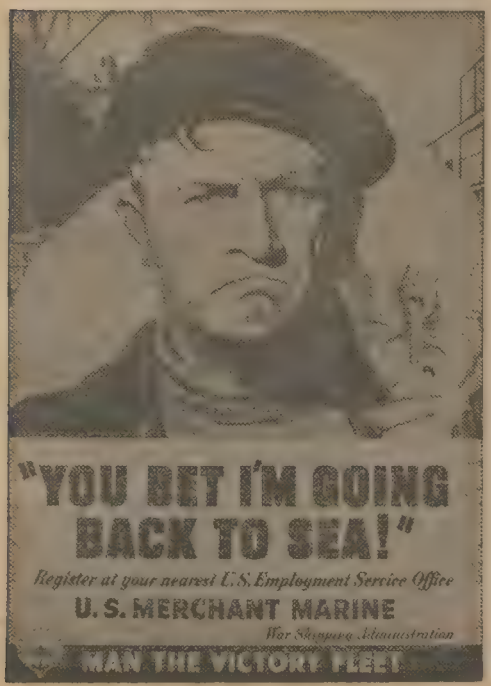
Lem moved close to the buckboard.

"Better give me my gun, Eagle-beak," murmured the Kid.

"No," said Lem.

"It's all right," said Hollister. "It's someone comin' from Masboy's. I bet I know who it is."

A horseman appeared out of the night gloom, halted by the buckboard, and said uncertainly, "That you, Jack?"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"It's me."

"What you got in the rig? And who's with you?"

"If I was you, Rod," replied Hollister with emphasis, "there's some things I wouldn't *want* to know."

The rider was silent a moment. "So that's it," he muttered, and he began to drift away.

Hollister raised his voice, "Scanlon's around somewheres."

"Thanks, Jack. I'll watch it." The rider went on.

"That's young Rod Hart. He's sweet on Cathy," said Hollister importantly. "You can bet Scanlon don't know he's been over here! Nor his uncle neither!"

"You mean Eden Hart?" said Lem.

"That's right—old Eden. It's a kind of funny setup about Rod. Him and Masboy—well, it's none of my business. I ain't the one to talk. My way is to—"

"To hell with that! Get goin'!" said the Kid.

"Giddap!" said Hollister.

* * *

Lem glanced about curiously as the buckboard rolled into Sid Masboy's ranch yard. Three or four men moved vaguely among the outbuildings, and Lem was conscious of intent, if hidden, scrutiny. The house was low and log-built. The windows were curtainless, and weeds fringed the sagging porch. Even in the darkness Lem could see that this place had no women.

Hollister halted the team and cried the house. Lem dismounted and went to the buckboard. A man came out on the porch.

"Masboy," Hollister murmured to Lem. Then, louder, "I got him, Sid!"

"Got who?" Masboy stared at Lem.

"Me," said the Kid as Lem lifted him from the buckboard.

Masboy started. "Harry! What's happened?"

"I guess I'll bring him in," said Lem.

Hollister waved his hand. "S'long, Sid. They'll tell you about it." He left the ranch yard at a rattling pace.

Lem strode by Masboy and entered the house. Masboy sent his voice bawling into the night. "Marty! Take care of these horses!"

Lem halted and looked for a place to deposit the Kid. The Kid said, "Put me down, Eagle-beak."

Lem set him gently on his feet. The Kid walked steadily to a hide-covered chair and sat down. He leaned back and shut his eyes.

Masboy came in and slammed the door behind him. He took a stance in the center of the room, a squat, hard-featured man, black-shadowed in the lamplight. His pale eyes bored at Lem. "What's the story?" he demanded.

"There was a welcomin' committee," said the Kid. He opened his eyes. "Give me my gun, Eagle-beak."

"Sure," said Lem. He crossed the room and handed the Kid his gun. He could feel Masboy's flinty stare following him.

"This is Eagle-beak," said the Kid. He put the gun in its sheath.

"Lem Fiddy is my name," said Lem, self-consciously.

"Eagle-beak," said the Kid, "is hungry. Why don't you let him rustle himself some grub? While we talk," he added meaningly.

Masboy pointed to a door. "Out there," he said ungraciously. "The lamp's lighted and there's still a fire in the stove."

The Kid said, "Maybe you'd better rustle enough for two."

"And close the door behind you!" said Masboy.

* * *

LEM STOKED up the fire in Masboy's kitchen. He found coffee, eggs, potatoes, and a half-cooked chunk of steak. Whistling softly to himself, he set about preparing a meal. From the adjoining room he could hear the low murmur of voices.

After awhile Masboy opened the door. "Call us when it's ready," he said.

Lem lifted the coffee pot from the stove. "It's ready now."

Masboy and the Kid came into the kitchen. Masboy tilted back in a chair and sat there stolidly, facing Lem and the Kid and watching the two eat. The Kid didn't eat much. He remained quiet, his eyes half-closed while he sipped coffee.

Lem nodded toward his companion. "He ought to be in bed," he said. "He's lost blood."

"Harry's tough," answered Masboy. "It's not him I'd worry about—not if I was you."

Lem neatly cleaned up his plate and crossed his knife and fork. "You mean," he said, "that I'd better worry about myself."

"My gun's heavy," said the Kid. "It's draggin' me down." He laid his gun on the table, picked up his cup in his left hand, and went on sipping coffee.

Masboy leaned forward. "What're you doin' here?" he demanded of Lem.

"I brought him here." Lem nodded at the Kid. "He said he wanted to come here, so—"

"I know all that!" Masboy motioned impatiently. "I mean what brought you here in the first place. How'd you happen to be comin' through the Pass the same time Harry was?"

Lem shook his head. "I don't know. It just happened. I was just travelin'. I met up with the Kid and—"

"Where were you travelin'?"

"Nowhere. I'm just lookin' for a job."

"How long since you saw Hart?"

Lem scratched his head. "I don't rightly know. It must—"

"The hell you say!" Masboy sprang to his feet. "Watch him, Harry!" He came close, bending until his hard eyes were on a level with Lem's.

"D'you know what happens to stock detectives in this valley?"

"No," said Lem with mild interest. "What does?"

"They turn up missin'! They— When did Hart send for you?"

Lem shook his head. "He didn't. I just came."

"When did you talk to him?"

"It wasn't exactly a talk," Lem answered thoughtfully. "He did most of the talkin'. I just listened."

The Kid broke in quietly, "When you get through askin' questions, Sid, it'll turn out that he saw Hart just about an hour ago. *Rod* Hart—we met him when we drove up in the wagon."

Lem nodded. "That's right. I knew he was Hart because Hollister said he was."

Masboy glared. "Eden Hart, damn it! I was talkin' about Eden!"

"*I* was talkin' about Rod. I never saw Eden."

"You figure him out," said the Kid wearily. "Sometimes you'll think he's stringin' you along, and sometimes you'll think he's just a dumb pilgrim. All I know is that he ain't a gunhand. When Hart's men jumped us in the gorge, he—" The Kid's eyes suddenly opened wide. "Eagle-beak, give Sid your gun. Give it to him!"

Lem hesitated, then reluctantly handed his gun to Masboy.

"Eagle-beak," said the Kid tensely, "what would you do with that gun if someone was to shoot at you?"

"I'd shoot back—if I thought it would do any good."

"Break open that gun, Sid. Has it been fired?"

Masboy inspected the gun, smelled the barrel. "Not tonight."

"I thought not." The Kid's little eyes glittered. "Eagle-beak, you've made a slip. You're drawin' pay from Hart."

"I ain't drawin' pay from anyone. I—"

"The hell you ain't! Then why didn't you shoot back when Hart's men were pluggin' at us?"

Lem grinned faintly. "Because," he said, "I didn't think it would do any good."

Masboy and the Kid exchanged a long glance.

Masboy stuffed Lem's gun in his belt. "I'll take care of this," he said grimly. "He motioned for Lem to rise. "Come on, you."

Lem was piloted along a hall. Masboy opened a door. "Get in there!" he ordered.

Lem walked into a tiny, windowless room. Masboy closed the door, and Lem was left in blackness. He heard the rasp of a lock, and the pound of Masboy's retreating footsteps.

Lem felt about him until he found a cot.

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He took off his clothes, stretched out on the cot, and went to sleep.

* * *

HE WAS awakened next morning by the Kid opening the door. The Kid had a gun in his hand. "Get up!" he ordered.

Lem pulled on his clothes, and the Kid herded him into the kitchen. "Where's the boss?" asked Lem.

"Sid? He pulled out a couple hours ago. It's ten o'clock."

Lem looked out the window at the bunkhouse. "How many men has he got?"

"Three besides me. They're with him. We're left alone, if that's what you're drivin' at."

Lem nodded. "I was wonderin'. How's your side?"

The Kid grimaced. "Stiff." He waved his gun toward the stove. "There's your breakfast, if you're hungry."

Lem washed and ate while the Kid kept him under steady surveillance. When Lem finished, the Kid tossed him a sack of tobacco and papers. "Keep 'em," he said. "They're Sid's. Your makin's must've got wet last night, same as mine."

Lem nodded. "Thanks." He rolled a cigarette. "You know," he said conversationally, "Masboy's older, but he looks like you in a way."

"Sid's twenty years older. We're cousins. This is the first I've seen him in two years. Sid used to have a place in Wyoming." The Kid grinned. "It got too hot for him, so he moved here."

"And now it's gettin' hot here. Eden Hart thinks he's rustlin' his cattle. I'd guess he is. He sent for you to do his gun work."

"Nice guessin'," said the Kid mockingly.

Lem shook his head. "It wasn't so much. Eden Hart musta heard you was comin' because he sent his foreman to stop you. You and Masboy think I might be a stock detective brought in by Eden. I just put two and two together."

The Kid sighed. "Eagle-beak, you got me stumped. If you was dumb, you wouldn't be so sharp at figurin'. And if you was smart, you wouldn't talk so open."

"I say what I think, mostly. That's because I got a clear conscience." Lem blew a smoke ring. "Right now," he said moodily, "I guess I'm a prisoner."

"No," replied the Kid. "I wouldn't put it that way. It's just that you've found a job. You said last night you was lookin' for one—now you've got it! You're cook."

"Cook?" Lem stared at him in dismay.

The Kid grinned again. "Tonight," he said, "when Sid and the boys get in, you're goin' to have supper ready for 'em."

Lem got up and moved to the door. The Kid raised his gun. "Hold it!" he warned.

Lem pointed to the woodbox. "It's empty. If I'm goin' to cook, I got to get wood."

The Kid nodded. "All right. I'll go along."

Lem left the house and went to the woodshed. The Kid, twirling his gun, sauntered along behind him. Lem filled his arms with a topheavy pile of wood and started back to the house. The Kid stepped aside, grinning. "Eagle-beak, you look like a—"

The topmost billet of wood slid from Lem's pile and landed on the Kid's toe. The Kid gave a yell of pain and danced on one foot. Lem dropped his wood and wrapped his long arms about the Kid. He took the Kid's gun and shoved it under his shirt.

He carried the struggling boy into the house and into the prison-like room where he had spent the night. He laid the Kid on the cot. "What you need," he said kindly, "is a good rest. You're bein' used too rough."

Lem went out and closed the door. The key was in the lock, and he turned it. He could hear the Kid cursing as he moved away.

Lem found his own gun in a drawer of Masboy's desk. He left the Kid's gun in its place, stepped out on the porch, and headed toward the barn corral. Ambler stuck his ugly hammer-head over the bars and nickered at his approach.

* * *

Cathy Hollister was hanging some odds and ends of wash on a line when she saw Lem Fiddy turning in at the ranch gate. She took a step toward the house, then halted and stared at him unwelcomingly.

In Lem's opinion she made an uncommonly fine picture that way, with her

sleeves rolled to her elbows, and her hair in damp ringlets, and the flush of her exertions still upon her cheeks. He dismounted and approached her awkwardly, his hat in his hand.

"Uncle John," she said concisely, "isn't here. He's in town." Then she lifted one of Jack Hollister's shirts and gave it her full attention as she pinned it on the line.

"I didn't come to see your uncle. I came to see you." Lem fumbled his hat. "On business," he added.

She flicked him a glance. "I don't need any thanks for tying up your partner, if that's your business."

"But he ain't my partner," Lem replied earnestly. "That's what I want to explain. I never seen him before. I met him by accident. We was comin' this way, so we rode along together. And then fellers started shootin' at us. And then the Kid got hurt, so I brought him here."

She gazed at him speculatively. "You said you came on business?"

"That's it. My business is to get things straight in your mind—about me, I mean."

"I see." She continued to gaze at him.

He said doggedly, "Do I look like a gunhand? Do I look like I was always thirstin' for someone's blood?"

"We-ell, not exactly." Then she began to giggle.

Lem grinned, too. "That's better. I don't mind folks laughin'. Generally they do, first off. Then they get used to me."

"I'm sure they do."

"All I'm lookin' for around here is a job. Sid Masboy offered me one, but I turned it down."

"I should think so! You don't want to have anything to do with that outfit! I wish Uncle John wouldn't be so—" She clipped off her words and bent to pick up another shirt from the basket. She straightened and said thoughtfully, "Why don't you see Rod Hart about a job? You can tell him I suggested it."

"I thought from what I heard that Eden owned the outfit."

She shook her head. "Rod owns it. His father left it to him. Eden is Rod's uncle, and he's holding it in trust till Rod's twenty-five. In two years he gets everything."

"But right now he's got nothin' to say about it."

"Not a thing. Eden runs the outfit and Jake Scanlon is his foreman. I doubt if they give Rod even puncher's wages. Just the same, he might be able to get you a job."

Lem nodded. "They sure owe me something on account of Scanlon shootin' at me last night. First, though, I guess I'll go into town and look around a bit."

"How's the little gunman this morning?"

"Right now," said Lem seriously, "he's restin'. By tonight he'll be hollerin' for raw meat. He's tough, that little feller!" He took a backward step. "Maybe," he suggested hopefully, "I'll see you again sometime."

"It's possible," she said. She gathered up her empty clothes basket. "Good luck to you."

CHAPTER THREE

Eagle-Beak's Exit

AS LEM left the Hollister place he saw a horseman ride out from behind the barn. The man trailed Lem until the two were beyond sight of the house. Then he called after him, "A word with you, my friend."

Lem halted. The newcomer was riding a magnificent steeldust. His saddle was silver-mounted, his boots were hand-tooled, and he was wearing a fifty-dollar beaver. As the man pulled up beside him, Lem said admiringly, "They sure must pay punchers good wages around here! I never could afford an outfit like that!"

The man scowled. "I'm no puncher. I'm Roderick Hart. I guess you know that name."

"Sure," said Lem. "I seen you last night. I'm Lemuel Fiddy." He waited a moment. "That's the Missouri Fiddys," he said helpfully.

Hart was a good-looking young man, and his scowl suggested petulance rather than ferocity. "I don't care who you are!" he said crossly. "And I don't want to know why you're here. I've got nothing to do with Sid Masboy's business. If my uncle and Jake Scanlon want to start a battle with Masboy, they can take the consequences. That's how I stand in this thing."

"That's all you wanted to tell me?"

"No. There was something else." Hart's glance was suddenly evasive. "I saw you talking with Cathy Hollister."

"Seems like a nice girl."

"She is! She wouldn't want to hurt anyone's feelings." Hart looked down at his hands. "Sometimes," he said casually, "a stranger might get the wrong impression. He might think he was more welcome than he really was."

"Meanin'," said Lem, "that you think I ain't so welcome."

"Well, I don't want to put it that way. It's just that Cathy *is* a nice girl, and you're —well, you live a pretty rough life."

Lem nodded. "Rough and tough. Man for breakfast every mornin', and a bloodbath every night." He surveyed Hart with contemplative eyes. "You know," he murmured, "that reminds me. I ain't had my practice yet this mornin'."

"Practice?" Hart looked at him suspiciously.

"Gun-practice," Lem explained. "I bet I can put a bullet through your hat without hardly touchin' your head. I can do it two out of three times." He drew his gun. "Now don't move. Just you set still."

"Hey!" yelled Hart. He ducked and spurred his horse.

Lem sheathed his gun. He watched soberly until Hart was out of sight, then he continued his own unhurried journey toward town.

* * *

Ramcoke was a fair-sized cowtown. There was a livery barn at the outskirts, and Lem put up his horse there. He ate in a restaurant, then wandered aimlessly along the wooden walks. Finally he turned in under a sign that advertised the Palace Saloon.

Lem had a drink and spun a dollar on the bar. "Have one yourself," he invited the barkeep.

The barkeep pocketed a cigar and in return indicated a willingness to talk. "Stranger?" he inquired.

Lem nodded. "How's jobs around here?"

"Scarce, until roundup." The barkeep furrowed his brow in thought. "There's several outfits you might try. The Hook and H is the biggest. Eden Hart runs it." He pointed to a poker table in the back end of the place. "There's old Eden's nephew now—the young fellow that just lost that big pot."

Rod Hart had his back to Lem. Lem watched curiously as he pulled out a roll of bills, peeled off a couple and laid them in front of him. "Carries a wad of it, don't he?" said Lem enviously.

The barkeep shook his head. "He won't long. They'll clean him. They always do."

"His uncle must keep him well supplied."

"Not so's you'd notice it. Any money Rod gets don't come from—" The barkeep paused. His manner was suddenly guarded. "You interested in Rod Hart?"

"Sure I am. He might give me a job."

"On the Hook and H? Not him. Eden is the man to see. He's in town now." The barkeep glanced at the clock. "Matter of fact, he'll probably be in here. He generally hunts up Rod before he goes back to the ranch."

"I'll hang around," said Lem. He seated himself at an empty table and tilted his hat partly over his eyes.

A small man with a graying mustache entered the saloon. "Rod!" he called sharply.

Rod Hart laid down his cards and turned sullenly. "I'm staying awhile," he said.

The small man halted. He was erect and taut, reminding Lem somewhat of a dog which unexpectedly has flushed game. The ends of his mustache seemed to bristle. "How much have you lost?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm winning."

The houseman pushed up his eyeshade, disclosing his pale, narrow features. He said ruefully, "He's cleaning us, Mr. Hart. The boy is a natural."

"Some day," said the small man in a disappointed tone, "he'll begin to lose. I hope it's soon. It'll put sense in him." He pointed to the clock. "At seven I'm leaving for the ranch. I'll expect you to be with me, Rod." He spun on his heel and marched out.

The houseman pulled down his eyeshade and was at once businesslike and intent.

Rod Hart was grinning. "To hell with him!" he said loudly and defiantly.

Lem Fiddy unfolded his long frame. He moved to the bar. The barkeep nodded. "That was him—Eden Hart." One eyelid drooped slyly. "He don't play poker, himself."

"No," said Lem. "I judged that."

He left the saloon and hurried along the walk after Hart. "Mr. Hart," he called.

Eden Hart stopped and swung around. "Yes?" he said impatiently.

As was usual at such moments, Lem was seized with self-consciousness. "My name," he said rapidly, "is Lem Fiddy. I'm lookin' for a job."

Eden Hart sized him up with surprisingly shrewd eyes. "New around here?"

Lem nodded. "I'm a top-hand," he said hopefully.

"Sorry," said Hart. "I doubt if we can use you. Anyway, I generally leave that up to Jake Scanlon, my foreman."

"Maybe I'd better see him."

"You can't. Not now. Jake's laid up with a bullet in his shoulder." Hart's stare abruptly fastened upon Lem's royally curved nose. "Now wait a minute!" he said bleakly. "Just when did you arrive here? Did you come through the Pass yesterday?"

Lem hesitated. "I guess I did," he answered finally.

"Then you're one of the two that plugged Jake Scanlon!"

Lem sighed. "I guess so, Mr. Hart. But I didn't know till now that Scanlon had been hit. The way it happened—"

"*You're* Masboy's man! And you've got the gall to ask me—"

"Now listen, Mr. Hart. If you'll let me explain—"

"By tonight," said Eden Hart in a clipped voice, "you be out of this town and on your way out of the valley!" He wheeled and went on, his back ramrod-stiff and his feet hitting the walk with military precision.

* * *

LEM TURNED back into the bar. The barkeep looked at him and pursed his lips sympathetically. "No luck, eh?"

Lem shook his head. "Who else could I hit up?"

"No one I know offhand. Why don't you head for the Hamp Creek country the other side of the hills? There's some big outfits there."

Lem set his mouth stubbornly. "Nope. I like this place. I'll find something. How much weight does Eden Hart carry around here?"

"Plenty! Don't get on *his* blacklist!"

Lem scratched his head. "I guess," he remarked dolefully, "I'll sit and brood awhile." He resumed his seat at the empty table.

The minutes ticked by, and young Rod Hart continued to lose at poker. The sun set, and the barkeep cast pointed glances in Lem's direction. Suddenly the livery hostler burst into the saloon.

Puffing, the paunchy hostler went directly to Lem. "Mister," he said, "something's wrong with your horse. He's down."

"What've you done to him?" Lem bounded from his chair.

The hostler was scared. He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Nothin'! I swear it! I just looked in his stall and—"

Lem thrust the man aside and hurried from the saloon. His feet beat a quick tattoo along the wooden walks of Ramcoke. The hostler did not follow him.

Lem saw no one as he turned into the dark coolness of the livery barn. Ambler was in his stall, saddled and bridled. Lem halted and stared. A voice spoke behind him: "Lead him out!"

Lem said with slow relief, "I might've guessed it was a trick." Then he turned.

The man behind him was lean and sorrowful-looking and he wore a sheriff's badge. Also, he had a gun in his hand. He said soothingly, "Now we don't want no unpleasantness. You just lead him out of the stall and we'll go out the back way."

"Sure," said Lem obligingly.

The sheriff had his own horse waiting behind the barn. The two men mounted, and the sheriff said, "Just don't make no sudden motions, and everything will be fine. We'll take this road out of town and turn off on the trail to the Pass."

Lem rolled a cigarette. "Any hurry?"

"Not a bit," said the sheriff genially. "Take your time."

Lem proceeded out of town, the sheriff following him. They turned into the Pass trail, and Lem said musingly, "When I was a button I thought bein' sheriff was the grandest job ever. But I guess it's like any other job—all grief and order-takin'."

"That's right," the sheriff responded gloomily. "Wearin' a badge ain't what it's cracked up to be."

"Nothin' is—even gun-fightin'. The first time you kill a man, it's excitin'. After that it gets to be a chore."

The sheriff halted. "I reckon," he said

uneasily, "this is as far as I need to go. You hurry and you can make the Pass by dark." He cleared his throat. "Like you said, a man has to take orders sometimes. No hard feelin's, I hope."

"None atall. Of course I always was slow to get riled."

"S'long," said the sheriff hastily.

Lem left the Pass trail and cut across the hill land. Just at nightfall he came to another trail. It was, Lem thought, the trail between Masboy's and town. Also, if Jack Hollister had been correct, there was a branch trail farther along which led to the Hart place. Lem tied his horse to a tree, then concealed himself in a brush clump and waited.

Presently he heard the thump of hoofs. Lem had expected young Rod to be with Eden. In this he was mistaken; Eden Hart was jogging along the trail alone. Lem stepped out from behind the brush.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killin' Is a Chore

EDEN HALTED and his hand flashed downward. Then he saw Lem's gun, and he became stiff and motionless. Lem moved close. Reassuringly he said, "This ain't a holdup, Mr. Hart. I just want to talk."

"Then put up that gun!" Eden folded his arms.

"It was a precaution," Lem murmured dryly. He sheathed the gun. "What I want," he continued somewhat awkwardly, "is to explain that all I want around here is a job. Yesterday I happened to meet up with a feller comin' through the Pass, and we rode along together."

"The Utah Kid," said Eden. "Masboy's brought him in to help rustle cattle."

Lem shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. I never seen him before yesterday."

"Then," said Eden sarcastically, "you just happened to pick damn' bad company."

"That ain't no reason to have the sheriff run me out of town."

"I thought it was!"

Lem cuffed his hat to one side. "Now look, Mr. Hart," he said earnestly, "I ain't askin' for a job from you. All I want is that you won't try and stop me workin' for someone else."

Eden was silent a moment, then skeptically he asked, "And all you came here for was a job? No other reason?"

"No other reason atall. That's the truth."

"You picked a poor place. Try the Hamp Creek country."

Lem shook his head. "I want to stay here."

"Why?"

"Because—" Lem hesitated. "Well, I got a reason."

"So I thought." Eden unfolded his arms. "I think," he said scornfully, "I'll give you a little advice: If you ever land in a law court, don't try to plead your own case. They'll hang you for sure!" Stiff-backed, he went by Lem and rode on up the trail.

Lem returned to his own horse and wearily climbed into the saddle. He sat there in the deepening darkness, moodily rolling a cigarette. Half-finished, the cigarette slipped from his fingers. He had heard a shot, close by and along the trail.

Cautiously Lem urged his horse forward. He followed a bend in the trail, and ahead of him he saw a rider, halted and staring at something on the ground. The rider whirled at Lem's approach. Gunflame stabbed at Lem, and a bullet whistled by. Then the rider set spurs to his horse and raced away.

Lem kept on and dismounted where the rider had been standing. By the trail, face-down, lay Eden Hart. Lem gently turned him over. Hart opened his eyes and closed them again. He breathed, shuddering, through clenched teeth.

Another rider was coming up the trail from the direction of town. Lem, watching alertly, remained squatted by Eden Hart. Rod Hart came around the trail bend. He jerked his horse to a stop and leaped from the saddle. "I heard a shot!" he cried. "Who is it? Not Uncle Eden!"

Lem made no answer; there was no need. Rod dropped to his knees by the stricken man. "Who did it? Damn 'em! Damn 'em!" His voice touched a hysterical pitch: "Who did it?" He tried to lift Eden's head, and Eden's neck was stiffly resistant.

"Don't," murmured Lem.

Eden's eyelids fluttered. He lifted an arm, finger pointing. "Him!" he gasped. "Watch out— Rod— He—" Then his arm dropped and his body went limp.

In his quietest voice Lem said, "He was shot in the back. I heard the shot like you

did. I even saw the killer. But it was too dark. He got away."

Rod Hart made a lightning movement. He snatched Lem's gun from its holster and sprang back. His own gun was out. "You did it!" he cried. "He pointed at *you!*"

Lem nodded. "He thought I done it, but he didn't know. He was mistaken. Look at my gun—you'll see it hasn't been fired."

"Then you've cleaned your gun! You've had time. Stand up! Put up your hands!"

Lem stood up and raised his hands. "I forgot," he said dismally, "how much weight a dyin' man's statement can have."

"Start walking! No, not toward town—that's too far!"

Lem started walking. He could hear Rod leading the horses behind him. They came to a trail branch, and Lem turned to the right. Rod stopped him. "Not that way! That's to my place! It's nearer to Masboy's. Keep straight ahead!" Rod's voice was taut like a string pulled to the breaking point.

Lem plodded on, careful not to stumble, careful to avoid any movement which would snap the tension of the man behind him.

* * *

IT WAS the Utah Kid who opened the door when Lem and Rod stepped up on Masboy's porch. The Kid began to chuckle. "Sid!" he cried. "It's Eagle-beak. He's come back, and he's brought his keeper with him."

Lem strode into the lamp-lit room with Rod close behind him. Sid Masboy moved alertly out of the shadows. Urgently he said, "Shut the door, Harry! Something's happened! What is it, Rod?"

"You'll find out what it is! I told you not to bring any gunhands into the valley. What orders did you give this man?"

"Him?" Masboy looked at Lem. "None! I don't know who he is. He came over the Pass with Harry there. I locked him up last night, and this mornin' he got away. When I got back here this evenin' he'd left Harry locked up, and he was gone. Where did—"

"He's a stock detective," said the Kid.

"No," said Rod, "he's not a detective. An hour ago he murdered Uncle Eden."

"What!"

"I saw it," said Rod. "He was on the trail beside Uncle Eden. I'd heard the shot. When I got there Uncle Eden was still alive. He lived long enough to point to him and say he did it."

"Point to him?" repeated the Kid. "You mean he still stayed there while you was talkin' to your uncle?"

Rod nodded. "He was going to bluff it out. He said someone else had done it."

"Who?" asked Masboy.

"He didn't say," Rod answered. "He claimed it was too dark to see. I got his gun away from him before he knew what I was doing, and then I brought him here. I—"

"He let you take his gun?" the Kid interrupted incredulously. "And that after he just killed a man! Hell!"

"He was trying to run a bluff, I tell you! He even claimed his gun hadn't been fired. Well, he had time to clean it. And besides Uncle Eden said he was the one!"

Masboy took Lem's gun, broke it open, then smelled the barrel.

The Kid said derisively, "You did that last night. You'll get to know that gun after a while."

Masboy smiled grimly. "I know plenty now! He's cleaned it all right, but it's been fired. Smell it yourself."

The Kid waved the gun carelessly under his nose and dropped it on a table beside him. He looked at Lem and grinned. "You're in a hole, Eagle-beak. You ain't talkin' much."

"I'm listenin'," said Lem. He kept his gaze on Masboy.

Masboy said with sudden decision, "Rod, you go for the sheriff. We'll take care of this gent for you!"

Rod went to the door and hesitated. "I wanted to be sure," he said uncertainly. "I wouldn't want it to turn out that he'd been working for you, Sid. I won't stand for murder. I'll see us both in jail before I let you mix me up in that."

Masboy nodded. "I understand. Don't worry, Rod. I'm no angel, but no one ever yet accused me of havin' a man plugged in the back."

Rod opened the door and went out. Lem heard his footsteps across the porch.

For a short time after Rod Hart left, there was silence in the room. Lem remained bent forward in his chair, elbows on knees. His gaze was remote now and reflective.

"You say you didn't plug Eden in the back. Then who did?"

Lem shook his head. "It was dark. I didn't get a good look."

The Kid hooked one leg over the table corner. Innocently he inquired, "Did Rod say his uncle was plugged in the back?"

"Didn't you hear him?"

"No," said the Kid. "That's something I missed." A faint smile twisted the corners of his tough young mouth. "I guess, Sid," he murmured, "the whole three of us know now who plugged Eden."

* * *

MASBOY LOOKED steadily at the Kid. A tension, almost palpable in its silence, settled across the room.

The Kid half-closed his eyes. "Sid," he said. "I don't like this. Ain't once tonight enough for you?"

"No," answered Lem. "Murder is somethin' that keeps rollin'. He's got to stop my mouth now. After that he'll begin to wonder if maybe you don't know too much."

Angrily Masboy cried, "Is it my fault if he sticks his big nose in where he's not wanted? I didn't ask him to come along the trail when he did!"

"You made a fool play, Sid. Why kill Eden at all?"

"Because," said Lem, "it puts Rod in the saddle at the Hook and H. Rod has been helpin' Sid rustle Hook and H stock, and Sid's been keepin' him supplied with money. Now Rod has plenty of money, and he'll have to pay Sid to keep him quiet."

"Eagle-beak, I reckon you are a stock detective after all!"

Masboy laughed harshly. "What's the difference what he is? It don't matter—now!"

The Kid stood up, leaning both hands on the table, his sharp little eyes gleaming above the lamp-glow. "Sid, you're bluffin'—you ain't goin' to go through with this!"

"The hell I ain't! Do you know any other way?"

"How'll you square it with the sheriff when he gets here?"

"I tried to escape," said Lem, "and he had to plug me. It's too bad, Sheriff, but that's how it happened. That'll be the story."

The Kid shook his head wonderingly. "Eagle-beak, you ain't so much to look at, but you got cast-iron nerves." His eyes grew wide. "How the hell can you sit there like that? You know what's comin'!"

"My thoughts ain't so quiet." Lem smiled gravely. "Do you know what's comin'? Who's goin' to be next after me?"

Sid Masboy's lips were tight-set, and his brow was contracted. Suddenly, without a word, he drew his gun.

The Kid gave a gasp. "Wait, Sid! I'm gettin' out of here! I don't want—" He whirled, and his elbow tipped the lamp.

The lamp splintered on the floor, and the room was thrown into darkness. In the same moment Lem flung himself headlong at Masboy. Once, harmlessly, Masboy's gun went off, and then Lem was in close, twining himself about the man, gripping his wrist savagely, striking upward.

Masboy staggered backward and fell. His gun banged again, driving a bullet into the ceiling. In the flash Lem glimpsed the killer's pain-goggling eyes, his rolling lips. Masboy's voice burst out in a great shout: "*Harry!* Where are you, Harry?"

Lem seized Masboy's wrist in both hands, pounded his knuckles on the floor, and shook the gun loose.

"Harry!" Masboy bawled.

Lem slammed the gun to the side of Masboy's head. He lifted the gun at arm's length and brought it down again.

In the darkness and silence Lem waited, listening and not moving. He heard a scuffing noise in the far corner of the room, and then the Kid's voice:

"Who is it? You, Eagle-beak? Sid?"

Lem pointed Masboy's gun, and still he waited, trying to muffle his own deep breathing. He heard the Kid's soft exhalation.

"It's Eagle-beak," said the Kid. His words grew louder with assurance. "If it was Sid, he'd answer. It's you, Eagle-beak." He was quiet a moment, then he said, "Don't be dumb, Eagle-beak—d'you think I knocked that lamp off by accident?"

"No," answered Lem, "I guess you didn't." He stood up, and he saw the Kid rising, too, his short body outlined against the far window.

"Hurt, Eagle-beak?"

"No," said Lem, and then he allowed his breath to come as was needful, hard and panting. He tossed Masboy's gun from him

and went to the table, groping over the top until he found his own gun.

The Kid threw open the door. "Get goin', Eagle-beak!"

Lem moved out on the porch. He looked back. "Thanks," he murmured. "I wasn't sure, but I thought you'd—"

"Save it, Eagle-beak. I don't like stock detectives." The Kid slammed the door.

LEM'S HORSE was in the yard where Rod Hart had left it. Lem climbed into the saddle and rode again along the trail where he had so recently walked. He was a mile from the ranch when he heard a horse coming behind.

"Eagle-beak! Wait, Eagle-beak!"

Lem waited, puzzled and startled. The rider wasn't the Kid—it was young Rod Hart. Hart lifted his hands.

"It's all right," he cried. "I don't have a gun. I know now who killed Uncle Eden—it was Sid Masboy."

Lem rolled a cigarette. He took his time. "You changed your mind about goin' for the sheriff?"

Rod nodded. "I got to thinking. I slipped back and listened at the window. It was partly open. I wanted to hear what Sid had to say when I wasn't there. I heard. I— How bad did you hurt Sid?"

"I knocked him out."

Rod shivered. "What'll I do? He'll talk before they hang him. He'll tell everything."

"More'n likely he will. How much has he got to tell? Did you help him rustle from anyone besides your own outfit?"

"Some. Not much. I had to beg Uncle Eden for every cent he gave me. It wasn't right! A man has to have *some* money!"

"To lose at poker. To buy fancy boots and saddle." Lem struck a match to his cigarette. "How deep was Jack Hollister mixed in this?"

"The rustling? Not at all. Oh, he knew what was going on all right, but he kept clear. I guess he was scared Cathy would find out. He— You're an Association man, aren't you? Did Uncle Eden send for you?"

Lem looked at him steadily. "Your uncle," he said, "is still layin' on the trail."

"I know. I know." Rod nervously twisted his fingers. "Well, I guess the best thing is to make a clean breast of it. I'll see the sheriff tonight. You tell the Cattlemen's Association that I have money now and I'll square everything up. Poor Uncle Eden—this will be a lesson to me. . . ."

Lem had no desire for Rod's company along the trail. He remained where he was while Rod went on, a sorrowing young man filled with self-pity. Presently Lem detected another rider drifting his way. He lifted his voice. "Is he dead?"

"Deader'n a herrin'!" The Kid came on and halted by Lem. "You must've hit him one gosh-awful smack!"

"I did." Lem smiled grimly. "I thought it would save the county hangin' expenses. No use wastin' money on a feller like that."

"That's right. He was my cousin, but I still ain't stickin' up for him. That last was too raw!" The Kid tilted his head to one side, giving Lem a long glance. "You know," he said, "I'm still not so certain about you, Eagle-beak. Who brought you in here? Eden?"

"I brought myself in," Lem replied wearily. "That's the truth!"

"Yeah? Then you'd better take yourself out again. Don't forget Rod Hart thinks you're the one that killed Eden."

Lem grinned. "Maybe he's changed his mind by now. I'll take a chance on it."

Lem thought of Cathy Hollister with her rolled-up sleeves and her hair in damp ringlets. "Yep," he answered, "I'm goin' to stay. I got a reason."

The Kid slowly shook his head. "Eagle-beak," he said in utter resignation, "you've got me stumped! I'm goin' to quit thinkin' and get the hell out of here! Sure you don't want to come along?"

"With you? No!" said Lem. "No, thank you!"

The Kid moved off into the night as Rod Hart had done. Lem finished his cigarette and put it out. He followed the trail a distance, and then turned off in the direction he judged Jack Hollister's house should be.

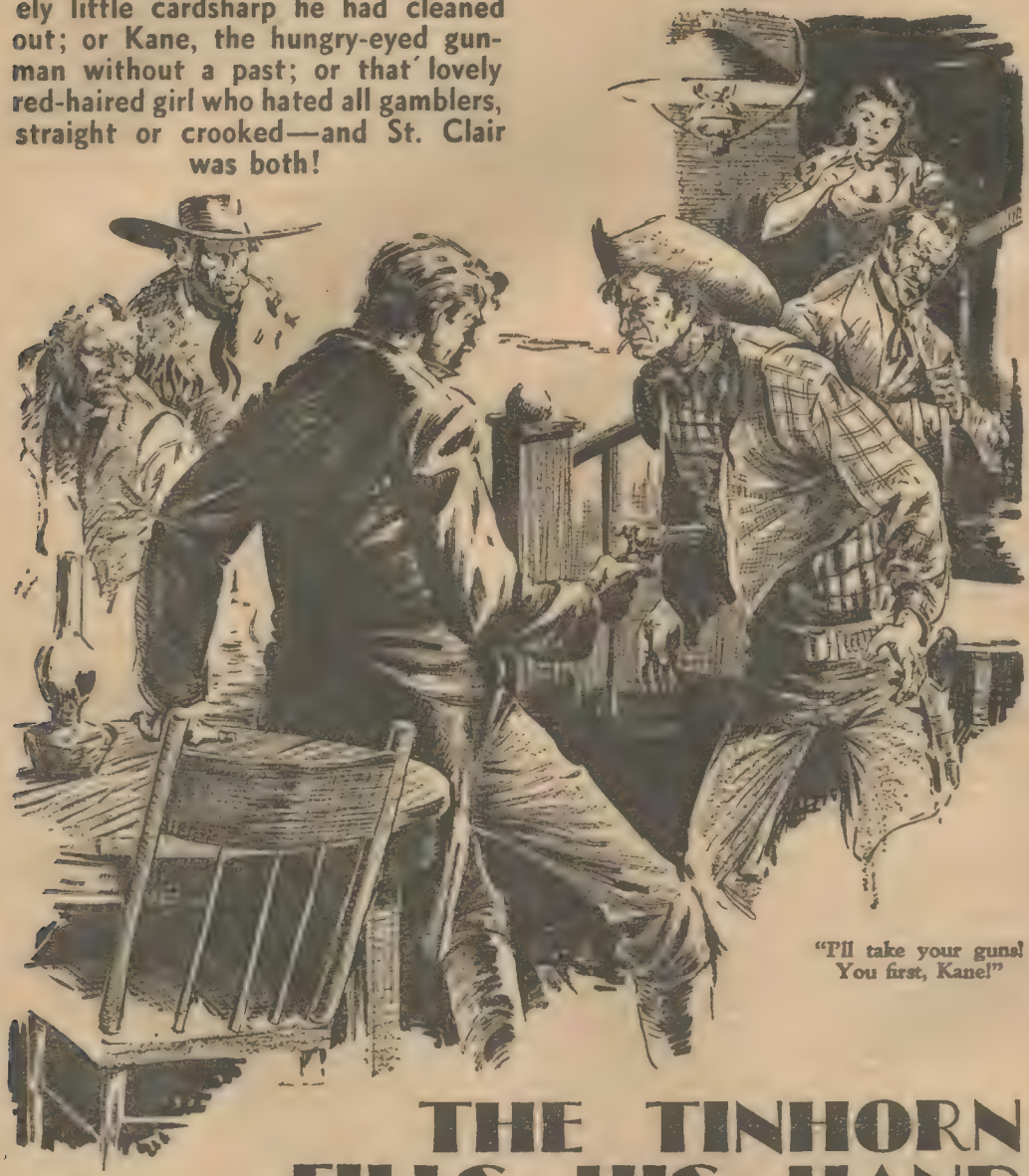
A place to sleep for the night was Lem's immediate problem. Hollister shouldn't object to giving him a bed in exchange for the news he bore. If he had to, Lem wouldn't mind sleeping in the barn.

As he rode along he whistled softly. He wasn't a bit discouraged. He'd only been here a day. Maybe tomorrow—or the next day, for sure—he'd find a job.

THE END

Someone in the snowbound house had a good reason for killing Allan St. Clair. It could be Ormand, the weasely little cardsharp he had cleaned out; or Kane, the hungry-eyed gunman without a past; or that lovely red-haired girl who hated all gamblers, straight or crooked—and St. Clair was both!

By H. A. DeROSSO



"I'll take your guns! You first, Kane!"

THE TINHORN FILLS HIS HAND

THE WIND was cold and the snow was cold, and the driver, up in his box on the Concord, swore to himself as he pulled his team to a stop in front of Daley's roadhouse. He climbed down to the ground and found that one of his passengers, Allan St. Clair, had opened the door of the coach.

He looked at the snow, packed hard and thick on the rims of the wheels, and he swore again to himself, for a girl was alighting from the coach. With the wind and

snow raging against his face, he said, "Well, folks, looks like we better spend the night here."

His four passengers had all dismounted. Night was falling and against the gloom and the swirling snow they looked like other-world creatures, bundled up in their heavy coats and mufflers. They stood in a group as though mutually undecided and the driver said, acid in his voice, "We won't get through to Trampas this night. I'd say it's more comfortable sleeping in a warm bed than in a snowdrift."

The gambler who was called Allan St. Clair shrugged. "We've no choice," he said. He stepped a little to one side and bowed slightly to the girl who started for the door. She went past him with a white look on her face and a coldness about her greater than the wind and snow.

St. Clair smiled as he always did when matters and people puzzled him. He stood thus, a half-smile frozen on his lips, staring after the girl, while Jack Ormand passed by and the gunman who called himself Bill Kane, and even the driver, who turned and asked, "Ain't you comin'?"

"Sure," St. Clair said dryly. "I kind of like the cold but I reckon I'll come."

Daley's place was warm and Daley was bustling about, making everybody comfortable. His wife came and, taking the girl's arm, led her to the rooms upstairs. St. Clair followed them with his eyes until they were out of sight and then walked over to the bar where Daley was serving Jack Ormand and Bill Kane.

Ormand laughed and slapped St. Clair on the back. "Have one on me, Al," he said. "You cleaned me out last night, but I still got enough left to buy you a drink."

"Sure," St. Clair said. He met Ormand's stare and the fellow laughed again, a trifle uncertainly, and turned his eyes away. Ormand was small and stout, but there was a quickness about him, especially in his hands, that served him well in his calling.

Allan St. Clair thought, *You don't fool me one little bit, Jack. You're just waiting to get me where you want me and then that hired gun of yours who calls himself Bill Kane will earn his pay. You've always been a poor loser, Jack, and your act don't fool me none.*

St. Clair raised his eyes and met Bill Kane's cold stare. Kane was tall and gaunt and without his mackinaw looked as though there was no flesh on him. His face was thin and hunger lurked in his eyes, a deadly hunger. He lifted his glass and, without taking his eyes off St. Clair, said, "Here's how, Jack."

Ormand said, "Will you be staying long in Trampas, Al?"

St. Clair shrugged. "I dunno," he said and moved away from the bar. He sat down at a table, lit a cigar and drew heavily on it. He looked through the smoke at Bill Kane. The gunman had his back to St. Clair now, but he caught Kane's reflection in the bar mirror and the man was still eyeing him.

Jack Ormand always played a sure thing, St. Clair thought, and felt uneasiness sweeping over him. That poker game back in the Commercial House at Benton's Bend hardly seemed a scant twenty-four hours past. Jack Ormand had had a sure thing there, too. A sure thing until Allan St. Clair had stepped in. . . .

Ormand came over and sat down at St. Clair's table. Ormand called, "How about something to eat, Daley?" and Daley said, "My woman will take care of that, soon's the rooms are ready," and Ormand smiled, a trifle tightly.

"I can't make you out," Ormand said.

The door opened, letting in a gust of wind and swirling snow. The driver slammed the door shut, swore, and said, "She's a dandy. Be here a week if she don't blow over soon. She's one hell of a dandy."

Bill Kane had turned to look at the driver and now Kane placed his back to the bar, his hungry eyes fastened on Ormand and St. Clair. St. Clair's cigar tasted suddenly stale.

Ormand said again, "I can't make you out, Al."

St. Clair spat a tobacco flake off his tongue. "Cut out the act, Jack."

"I don't get you."

"Is that all you can say?"

Ormand shrugged. "Hell, man, what've you got against me? You cleaned me out last night, clean as a hound's tooth. I take it like a good sport and you act huffy as hell."

St. Clair laughed. "Yeh," he said. "You sure are a good sport, Jack."

Ormand was quiet. His face was whiter than usual. His lips twitched a little and

after a while he said, "I'll remember that, Al."

* * *

ST. CLAIR said nothing. He sat there, puffing his cigar, watching Bill Kane through the smoke that drifted upward in front of his eyes. He was conscious of the thickness of the money-belt about his waist, the belt that held Ormand's roll and also a little group of bills that had belonged to that boy. . . .

He couldn't have been more than twenty. St. Clair hadn't even known his name. Just a kid with a big roll that went to his head, a kid easily taken in by smooth-talking Jack Ormand. Ormand had been fleecing the kid, so Allan St. Clair sat into the game and fleeced Ormand.

St. Clair had little taste for turning a crooked card. But he had a violent hate for all those gamblers of Ormand's cut, and giving them a taste of their own medicine was the one pleasure in St. Clair's life. He'd taken the kid's money in the process, but he'd kept a record of that and he'd intended returning it to the kid later on. Maybe that would teach the kid a lesson. But the kid had taken it too hard; a scant five minutes after he'd left the table he'd put his gun against his head. . . .

St. Clair couldn't get the kid's face out of his mind. There had been laughter in the kid's voice and a promise in his eyes. He'd had his whole life ahead of him, but a poker game had ended all that.

And Allan St. Clair cursed the day he'd taken the way of the cards. But that had been long ago and that was the only trade he knew, and a man in his early thirties is kind of old to change his ways. Still it was a good life, if it weren't for snakes like Jack Ormand and kids like the one back at Benton's Bend, and that girl with loathing so deep in her brown eyes. . . .

That was how it was that evening. As they ate the girl sat alone. She was tall and slim and the lamplight lighted the red gold in her hair. She sat alone, but every once in a while St. Clair would feel her eyes on him. Always there was that coldness in them, and a loathing. At times he felt even a burning hatred, but he wasn't sure about that.

What hate could she hold for him? He'd never seen her before. He didn't even know her name. But he was a gambler. That was sufficient reason, he felt. It was not the first time in his life he had encountered this animosity in women. . . .

He kept to himself the early hours of the night. Jack Ormand made no more attempts to engage him in conversation. Ormand and Kane took a table to themselves and played cards. The driver and Daley talked at the bar. St. Clair sat at his table, his thoughts filled with the kid's face and the girl's eyes, and that gaunt deadliness of Bill Kane.

He was the last to retire. Daley was dozing behind his bar. St. Clair rose slowly and loosened the sixgun he wore in a holster under his left arm.

He went up the stairs slowly. He could hear the song of the wind outside and with the fire down low, a chill was beginning to creep into the place. He mounted to the top of the stairs. The girl was waiting for him there, with a gun in her hand.

He pulled up sharply, the barrel of the gun inches from his chest. He stared at her. Shock left him unnerved a moment, shock and the hatred he read in her eyes.

He searched his mind for words, finally said, "What is this?"

She did not speak. Little by little the strain went out of her face and the life in her eyes died. He reached out and took the gun from her, and she made no effort to restrain him. He slipped the gun into his pocket.

"What is this?" he asked again. "Why do you take to me like you'd take to poison?"

She spoke now, more to herself than to him. "I thought it would be so easy. Just point the gun and pull the trigger. I thought it would be so easy, but I'm just a woman and killing is a man's job."

"If only you'd not talk in riddles," St. Clair said.

The girl turned suddenly, but he reached out, grabbing her arm. He said a little angrily, "Wait a minute. I reckon I got some explanations coming. You've never looked at me without seeming to be staring at something low—"

"Why shouldn't I?" she flared.

"Why should you? he demanded. "God, I don't even know your name. I never saw you before today. There is something fa-

miliar about you but I can't place it. I only know that I've never seen you—how could I have done anything to make you want to kill me?"

She tried to break his grip but he grasped her free hand. "I'm waiting to hear what you have to say," he said. "I'll let you go then. Not before."

She was silent. He stared at her face, so close to his, and a poignant longing gripped him for a moment.

"I thought at first it was because of what I am," he said slowly. "But it can't be that. You don't look at Jack Ormand the way you do at me. And he's a first-class snake if there ever was one. Why do you hate me so?"

She would not speak. He held her a moment longer, looking down at her face, pale and beautiful in the shadows. Then he said, "I know of ways to make you talk, but I'm no Indian. I would like you to explain things, though."

He released her and she stepped away a little. He said, "At least, tell me if you'll try again."

"I'll always try," she blazed. "I'll try until some day I'll go through with it. Live with that knowledge a little. I want it to haunt you. . . ."

He put that half-smile on his lips again. "You do hate me, don't you," he said.

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked again. There was a locket about her neck. She opened it then and showed St. Clair the picture.

"Remember him?" she demanded.

It was the face of the boy who had sat in that game back at Benton's Bend.

St. Clair was stunned. He wanted to explain, but the words would not come to him readily.

When they did come at last the girl was gone, and he was left there with only the dark and the haunting image of the boy's face before his eyes.

HE WENT to his room and sat with his thoughts. He did not try to sleep. There were too many things on his mind, things that went around in endless circles and left him more bewildered an hour later than when he'd started.

He rose to his feet and went downstairs. The big barroom was empty. The fire in the box stove had almost died. Only a few faint embers glowed, and he stirred them up, placing fresh wood on them. He lit a lamp and turned it down low, setting it on the bar where it gave off a feeble light that left the farthest reaches of the room in heavy shadow.

He stood over the stove until the fire caught and the chill was driven out of him. Then he went behind the bar and poured himself a drink. He was holding it in his hand when he heard the footsteps creaking down the stairs.

St. Clair lowered his drink carefully and reached under his left arm. The butt of his gun felt warm and reassuring.

He stood thus, facing the stairs, as those slow, deliberate steps reached the bottom and then started for the bar. He could make out the figure of a man now and as he stepped forward and the shadows fell away, St. Clair saw that the man was tall and gaunt, with hunger in his face and eyes.

Bill Kane said, "I thought I'd find Ormand here."

St. Clair kept his hand on his gun. He said nothing. The gunman stared at St. Clair's hand, hidden under his coat, and smiled a little with no humor in his eyes.

As long as you're playing bartender," Kane said, folding his arms over the bar, "how about setting one up for me?"

Their eyes locked and after a while St. Clair dropped his hand from under his shoulder and pushed a bottle and glass over to Kane. He said, "Thanks," dryly, and poured his drink.

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"It's damn' cold upstairs in those rooms," he said.

"What do you want?" St. Clair asked coldly.

"Want? I told you I thought Ormand was down here. I saw the light and came down. Ormand wasn't in his room."

"Are you sure Ormand didn't send you?"

"What if he did?"

"If he did," St. Clair said, tensing, "let's get it over with."

Kane laughed. "You're imagining things, friend," the gunman said.

"I'm waiting," St. Clair said, lifting his right hand a little.

Bill Kane nodded at the back of the bar. "Lots of bottles back there. Be a shame to start shooting and maybe break some of them. Daley wouldn't like that."

St. Clair smiled a little. "If you're so fussy about Daley's property we can step outside. . . ."

The hunger was very strong in Kane's eyes now. "You seem set on having a shoot-out, friend. But I got no time for you now. Maybe some other time I'll oblige you."

He turned away abruptly and headed for the stairs. His steps were unhurried and soft. St. Clair stared after him, until the shadows enveloped him and only the creaking of the boards told of his progress. Soon they were silent, too.

St. Clair lifted his drink and downed it. He came out from behind the bar and stood a long while, staring up into the darkness where Bill Kane had disappeared.

He was standing there, staring, when he saw the shadow stirring and then someone was coming down the stairs. He stepped back until he brought up against the bar. His hand was on his gun again and his brain kept asking, *Who is it this time?*

It was the girl. He laughed when he saw her. "Come for another try?" he asked dryly. "Where's your gun? Or are you going to try something else this time?"

She would not meet his eyes. "I came to warn you," she said.

"You don't understand. I heard prowling upstairs. I looked around and Mr. Ormand came out of your room with a knife in his hand. I'm sure it was a knife. He went to the head of the stairs and then returned to his room. Mr. Kane came up the stairs then. I waited for him to go to his room and then I came and saw you. So I thought I'd tell you."

He bowed slightly and that half-smile came to his lips. "Thank you," he said mockingly. "First you want to kill me, then you save my life. You sure change your mind in a hurry."

"Well, I've told you," she said wearily, and turned to go.

"Hold on," he said. He went up to her and took her arm. "I want to talk with you."

"About what?"

"I—I want to explain things. . . ."

"I don't think they need explaining."

He said desperately, "I didn't mean it like that. I didn't know him. I didn't even know his name."

"Bob told me everything. Told me how he'd lost everything to you, Mr. Allan St. Clair. That money wasn't Bob's. He'd taken it from the bank where he worked. He told me how he suspected you'd been cheating, but he wasn't sure and he had no proof. Then he went to his room and—and—"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to—"

She was crying now. "That doesn't bring Bob back. . . ."

"I'm sorry," he mumbled again, because he could think of nothing else to say. Seeing her cry like that, softly, but with illimitable pain in her voice, left him powerless to think or act.

She turned and went up the stairs. He shook his head and went back to the bar. Suddenly he began laughing, quietly but deeply, and the laughter shook him. It was all so weird and unreal and funny. . . .

HE WAS still laughing when the bullet took him. First he felt the force of the blow, high in his shoulder, then the numbness and finally the pain began, faint at first, then bursting into a violent red blaze across his mind.

Then he was crouching on his knees beside the bar, gun in hand, staring up into the concealing darkness. His brain was asking, *Who is it? Is it Jack Ormand? He hasn't the guts—but maybe now he has. Is it Bill Kane? Or maybe it's the girl? I can't believe that of her—*

He waited there for another shot, his flesh cringing at the thought of its impact, but

none came. Instead he heard voices and footsteps racing down the stairs. He held his fire, for it was all of them—Bill Kane, and the girl, and Jack Ormand, Daley, and the driver.

St. Clair rose shakily to his feet. He braced himself against the bar. They ringed about him in a semicircle, all eyes on his gun. He laughed wolfishly, gritting his teeth to the pain the laughter brought.

He looked at Bill Kane, full into the man's hungry eyes. "Who took that pot-shot at me?

"We'll see," St. Clair said. "It's a good trick one of you is playing. You didn't have time for another shot. You didn't quite make it with your first try. But you reckoned on crippling me and having another crack at me later on. So you came down here with the others to bluff it out. Well, we'll see if your bluff works."

He ran his eyes over them, studying them one by one. The girl's face was drawn, and her eyes were frozen on the blood seeping down his side. Kane's mouth twisted in a mocking grin, but the hunger was boiling in his eyes. Stout Jack Ormand was smiling, muscles rippling under his pale skin. Daley and the driver were frowning their bewilderment.

He said, "Whoever took that shot hasn't had time to clean his gun. So if you'll just hand over your six-shooters, one at a time, we'll get to the bottom of this. You first, Kane!"

The smile left the gunman's face. "No one takes my gun," he said slowly.

St. Clair smiled coldly. He drew back the hammer of his .45 to full cock, and the double clicks were abnormally loud in the silence of the room.

"No?" St. Clair asked softly.

The gunman hesitated. He was peering intently at St. Clair's face, and there must have been something very persuasive in the gambler's visage, for Kane suddenly shrugged and very carefully drew his six-gun, handing it, butt foremost, to St. Clair.

St. Clair was reaching for the weapon when, out of the corner of his eye, he caught the movement. It was very slight, a blurring of the shadows, but he shoved Kane's gun out of his mind and whirled.

Little Jack Ormand had a feral grin on his face, and the gun in his hand was blazing, roaring, stabbing orange flame.

But St. Clair had already fired, straight and true. The blazing of his gun was only the reflex of a dying man, and death had laid its glaze over Ormand's eyes even before he fell.

* * *

After St. Clair's wound had been tenderly dressed by the girl, they pieced the story together. Gaunt Bill Kane proved an unexpected help.

"I was on Ormand's trail. His specialty was talkin' green kids into poker games and fleecin' them. He worked that on a brother of mine, then bushwhacked him when the kid squawked. I wasn't sure it was Ormand. He'd used a different name then. That's why I hung around him so much, pumping him. And you thought I was in his hire.

"You saved me a job of killing, St. Clair, not that I wouldn't have enjoyed this one. But I reckon it was your job. He talked young Bob Sothern into that game in the Commercial House. I was there and saw. Then when you upset his wagon, Ormand was out to get you and your roll. He spread it around to the girl how you'd talked young Sothern into the game and picked him clean.

"I set her straight after she tried picking you off early tonight, but I saw she wasn't quite sure whether she should believe me. I reckon she's sure now."

She looked at Kane and smiled. "Thank you," she said. "You've been kind."

The hardness went out of Kane's face, and the hunger left his eyes a moment. He smiled back at her. "It's all right. I had a brother, too."

Then he turned and left them, beckoning Daley and the driver with him. St. Clair and the girl were left alone.

"I'm sorry," she said humbly. "I was mistaken about you. All Bob said was that he'd lost the bank's money to you, and I presumed that you'd planned it all. And then Ormand told me so. I didn't know what else to think."

"Let's not talk about it any more," he said. He took her hand in his, and she made no move to take it away.

"I don't even know your name," he said laughing. "But I think there'll be time to learn it."

"Yes," she said, laughing with him.

It was too late—the sheriff swung his gun at Sid's head.

The Call to Kill

By GUNNISON STEELE

This had been very neat, Sid Lukes thought—he'd knifed the old man, rifled his miserly hoard, and nobody could ever prove he'd done it. . . . Unless that whiskered oldster called up from the wrong side of hell to accuse him!

IN ALL HIS shadowy young life there was one trade Sid Lukes had never learned: hard work. He was slight-built, sandy-haired, with thin, cunning features. He was proud of his flashy clothes, of his ability to live without working, and of his dexterity at poker. Right now, however, he was losing.

Sid's two opponents were a young puncher named Slim, and old Shanty Cannon. Shanty, a gnarled, bewhiskered oldster whose actions belied his seventy-five years, owned the big 66 outfit ten miles west of Sentinel. Shanty liked to drink and play poker and raise a lot of hell, and he'd refused to let age slow him down.

"Whiskey never hurt nobody," Shanty

declared. "It's the water you have to drink after you sober up that kills you!"

Sid Lukes had played poker with the peppery old rancher several times since coming to Sentinel three months before. He'd worked hard to ingratiate himself with Shanty Cannon, and he'd succeeded. But he'd found Shanty a wolf at poker.

Sid saw young Tom Cannon when he entered the saloon, and he knew there was going to be an explosion. Tom Cannon was Shanty's grandson, a slender, dark-haired young gent who was as serious and quiet as old Shanty was fun-loving. Both parents dead, young Tom lived at the 66 with Shanty. He had a hard time trying to ride herd on the hell-haising oldster.

Tom Cannon's gaze circled the room, focused on the three at the table, and he came quickly forward. He said, "Shanty, don't you think you've played enough poker for one day?"

"No, by ganny, I don't!" Shanty exploded, and slammed down his cards. "What you doin' here?"

"I thought maybe you were ready to ride home."

"Well, I'm not! Got so a man can't have any fun without some pious young whipper-snapper slappin' him on the wrist. You go on home, now, and drink your milk!"

Young Cannon flushed, said, "You call it fun to let some slick-fingered tinhorn crook you out of your money? And I don't mean that for you, Slim."

Sid Lukes was as yellow as he was cunning. But he had to make a show of resenting the insult. He said, "You talk too much, friend."

"So what?" Tom Cannon stared hard at Sid Lukes, lips curling down. "After this, Lukes, don't play any more poker with my grandfather. I don't like you."

Shanty swore luridly, and hollered, "You shut up, kid! You got no right to go insultin' my friends. Maybe you don't like him, but I do. He's my kind of folks."

"Then you don't have a very good opinion of yourself—"

"Is that so!" Shanty's whiskers were bristling, his eyes fiery, and he pounded the poker table with his fist. "You listen to me, kid. I got about enough o' your preachin'. You bein' my grandson don't give you the right to feed me on mush and bed me down at sundown every day. Ain't but one thing I *have* to do, and that's die, and by grabs, I ain't so danged sure of that! I'm seventy-five, and I allus got along, ain't I?"

* * *

SID LUKES sat back, his weasel soul enjoying the quarrel, thankful that Shanty's wrath had diverted Tom Cannon's attention from him. The youngster was getting thoroughly angry, too, he saw.

The beginning of a plan touched his alert brain furtively.

"Yes, you've got along," Tom admitted stiffly. "But until lately you never made a habit of associatin' with cheap tinhorn crooks."

"Dang-gust you, kid!" Shanty yelled. "You hush callin' my friends names. Sid, here, is a real gent. Just because he ain't a milksop, like you, don't mean he's a crook. You better get out of here now, before I lose my temper and tan your britches!"

"I wouldn't advise you to try that!"

"Wouldn't, huh?" Shanty reared to his feet. "By hell'n gander, I'll—"

But young Tom Cannon whirled abruptly and left the place.

Old Shanty fumed and sputtered for a while, but soon he was chuckling. "Kid don't mean no harm," he declared. "Took his hard-workin' habits from his mother, I reckon. Jake, bring us another bottle of that wildcat pizen!"

But the flare-up obviously had its effect on Shanty, for he soon quit the game. Sid Lukes saw him ride at a fast clip out of town toward the 66. Thereupon, Sid left the saloon and strolled along the street for a breath of fresh air.

He met Sheriff Jim Bone in front of the post office. Bone was a rawboned oldster with gray handlebar mustaches. He'd never tried to conceal his dislike for Sid.

Now he said pointedly, "I hear Shanty Cannon and his grandson just had a spat over you."

"Not over me," Sid denied piously. "I just happened to be there when it happened."

"Lukes," the sheriff said, "you better catch your hoss and ride. You got till sundown to get outa town."

Sid looked surprised and injured. "Why, Sheriff, what have I done?"

"That's just it—you ain't done a thing. You ain't hit a lick of work since you showed up here three months ago. We don't like loafers and cardslicks here. So get you a job, or get outa my county!"

Sid watched as the sheriff went on along the boardwalk. Anger danced inside him, but there was nothing he could do. Get out of town or go to work—and Sid Lukes had no intention of going to work. He'd had a good thing here, but now it was ended. Or was it . . . ?

The plan that had touched his cunning brain, back there in the saloon, stirred again. He got his horse, his few belongings, mounted and rode out of Sentinel. Two hours later he drew up before the sprawling old 66 ranch house on a limping horse.

"I'm headin' out for Red Butte," Sid said. "Horse threw a shoe a mile down the trail, and I thought maybe I could get it fixed here."

Young Tom Cannon looked at him with unconcealed distaste, but reluctantly agreed. Old Shanty was more cordial.

"Glad you happened along, younker," he said, grinning. "Sun's most down, and you can put up here for the night. I'll have somebody to drink and play poker with!"

Sid offered just the proper amount of protest. Tom Cannon showed plainly he disliked the idea, but he couldn't be discourteous enough to say so. So Sid allowed a puncher to lead his buckskin away to the blacksmith shop, and he went into the big house with Shanty.

* * *

AFTER SUPPER, Sid and Shanty went into Shanty's private room in the front part of the house. Shanty produced a bottle and a deck of cards, and they started playing poker.

"A gent's got to have some fun," Shanty chuckled, "or he gets old too quick. Take that grandson of mine, now—he don't know he's been born yet!"

Mention of Tom Cannon stirred resentment and hate inside Sid. He hadn't missed the open contempt in young Cannon's eyes, and he bitterly resented it, mainly because he, Tom, was everything that Sid was not.

Sid's alert eyes missed nothing in the room as they played. The room was simply, almost rudely furnished. It was the big old iron safe in a corner of the room that riveted Sid's attention. Old Shanty kept his whiskey in that safe. Likewise, Sid now knew, he kept a large amount of money there.

He'd heard that rumor numerous times since coming to Sentinel. A little while ago, when Shanty had opened the safe to get his bottle, Sid had glimpsed gleaming stacks of banknotes. The safe must contain at least several thousand dollars.

Rumor of that money-stuffed safe had been the magnet that lured him to the 66 ranch in the first place, but this was the first proof he'd had that the gossips were right.

Sid Luke's black luck of the afternoon continued, and within a couple of hours old Shanty had his last dollar. He concealed his savage humor, however, and took old Shanty's ribbing with outward good nature.

Finally he got up, yawning, and said, "Well, I've had a hard day, and I've got a long ride ahead of me tomorrow, so I reckon I'll turn in."

As he opened the door, Tom Cannon came along the hallway and stood aside for him to pass. Tom's face was dark with anger, and obviously he had been heading for Shanty's room. Sid went on along the hallway, pausing at the door of the room Shanty had assigned him. He saw young Cannon go into Shanty's room and close the door.

He heard Shanty say truculently, "Well, what do you want, young 'un? Milk-fed pups like you oughta be in bed long ago!"

Sid didn't catch Tom's reply. He crept back along the hallway, triumph rising inside him, and for several minutes he crouched outside the door to Shanty's room and listened to the two quarreling bitterly inside. The quarrel was about the usual thing: Old Shanty's drinking and hell-raising—and Sid Lukes.

"This Lukes is no good," Tom Cannon declared. "He won't work, and he's crooked as a barrel of snakes. He's been in here for the last several hours, drinkin' your whiskey and winning your money."

"It's my whiskey and my money," Shanty yelled, "only he didn't win any of it. If

you was more like Sid, maybe we'd get along better."

"If that's what it takes, then we won't get along. And I'm tired of stayin' here, the way things have been!"

"Then why don't you line out?"

There was a short silence, then Tom said hotly, "All right, I will! I'll go right now, tonight. If you ever decide to change your ways, send for me and I'll come back."

"I'll change when I die," Shanty hollered. "But you'll come crawlin' back a long time before that!"

Sid Lukes ducked back into his own room, just in time to keep from being seen by Tom Cannon as he flung open the door and strode into the hallway. Sid heard the slender youth as he went into his own room, across from Sid's; heard him as he came out again minutes later, stalked along the hall and out the front door.

Sid sneaked along the hall and out through a back doorway. This second quarrel between old Shanty and his grandson, and Tom's running away, was a piece of luck he hadn't expected. It fitted into his scheme with incredible perfection.

* * *

THE NIGHT was dark and windy. Sid circled the house and crouched in the deeper shadows of a shed. From here he could hear Tom Cannon, and see him dimly, as he led a saddled horse from the barn; as he mounted, set spurs to the beast and rode recklessly away from the 66.

From his position, Sid could see the red glow of several cigarettes at the bunkhouse, and he knew the 66 punchers must have heard the quarrel between Shanty and Tom, had witnessed the youngster's angry departure. Sid grinned, watching as the cigarettes vanished one by one, then he went back into the house. A light still glowed in Shanty's room.

An hour passed, while Sid sat there in the dark, waiting. The ranch was dark and still, except for the strip of light under Shanty's door and the occasional thump of his bare heels on the floor. Finally, when he was sure the punchers were asleep, Sid Lukes got up, went out and along the hall to Shanty's door.

When he tapped on the door, Shanty opened it and stood there in a red nightgown that revealed his bony shanks. The old rancher grinned and told him to come in.

"What's on your mind, younker?"

Sid tried to look worried. "I couldn't help hearin' that ruckus you and Tom had. I figured maybe I was the cause of it, and I couldn't sleep."

Shanty snorted. "What of it? The pup'll come back when he gets hungry. How about a drink?"

"Well, yeah—maybe it'd help. Where is it?"

"Locked it up when I saw Tom. Allus keep it locked in my safe, to keep Tom from bustin' it. I'll get it."

Sid stood very still as Shanty crossed and knelt before the old iron safe. He was tense and nervous. Stealthily he took a long-bladed, bone-handled knife from under his shirt. The two windows were shaded. The room was very quiet, except for Shanty's loud breathing and the whir of the dial.

Quick as a big cat, naked violence in his pale eyes, Sid Lukes crossed the room. Tumblers clicked inside the safe suddenly, the door swung open, and over Shanty's shoulder Sid saw the stack of banknotes. His breath sucked in greedily.

Shanty heard him, and turned his head to stare up at him. He saw Sid Lukes' pale killer's face, the gleaming knife in his upraised hand, and he knew suddenly that he'd been sheltering something worse than a mad wolf. He tried to get to his feet.

But Sid's left arm encircled his throat from behind. His right hand, holding the knife, struck savagely. . . .

Ten minutes later, Sid Lukes left the ranch house. He saddled his buckskin, mounted and rode swiftly away. He made no effort at secrecy, for he wasn't lining out; he was too cunning for that. The stolen money — he hadn't taken time to count it—made a comforting bulge under his shirt.

Halfway between the 66 and Sentinel, he cached the money in a shallow canyon, piling shale and rocks over it. Then, cocky and jubilant over what he'd done, he remounted and rode on into Sentinel. It was far past midnight when he reached there, but he saw that a light burned inside Sheriff Jim Bone's cottage on the edge of town.

Sid rode straight up to the cottage, dis-

mounted and tapped on the door. Sheriff Bone, fully dressed, opened the door. He didn't seem surprised at seeing Sid. He motioned him into the lighted room. Sid felt a momentary stab of uneasiness, but, seeing that the room was empty except for the sheriff and himself, the feeling passed.

* * *

HE PUT ON a good act. He blurted, "Sheriff, I've just come from Shanty Cannon's place. Shanty's been killed!"

That seemed to jar Jim Bone. He said sharply, "Killed? Who in Tophet done it?"

"Well, I couldn't say, for sure. That is, I didn't see it done. But I heard and saw some things."

"What things? Speak out, dad-blast you!"

"I heard Shanty and his grandson, Tom, squabblin'."

"Agin—after that ruckus in town today? What was the ruckus about?"

"Same as today—Shanty's hell-raisin'." Sid went on, like he was reluctant to talk. "Others heard it, too. They got pretty loud. I could hear it plain from my room across the hall."

"What was you doin' there in the first place?"

"Why, I was ridin' out, like you told me. My bronc had thrown a shoe, and I'd stopped there to get it fixed. Shanty asked me to bed down for the night. Nothin' wrong in that, was there?"

"Not a thing. Hell's hogpen! Go on and tell me what happened!"

"Well, I heard 'em squabblin,' and some sounds like maybe a fight was goin' on. But it wasn't any of my business, so I stayed in my room. Then I heard the kid run out, get on his horse and ride away like the devil was after him."

Sid was enjoying himself. So far, he'd told nothing but the truth and he could prove every word of it.

"Well, after a while I got worried, and when I saw there was still a light in Shanty's room, I went in. There he was on the floor, dead as burnt grass. He'd been knifed. And his safe had been cleaned out."

Jim Bone shook his grizzled head. "Shanty and the kid get into a fight, and the kid killed him. Then he got scared, cleaned out the safe and lined out. That the way you see it?"

"I wouldn't say that," Sid protested. "I kind of liked the kid—wouldn't want to get him into trouble. But you got to admit it *does* look bad."

Jim Bone said coldly, "For you, yeah! Lukes, I'm arrestin' you for the murder of Shanty Cannon!"

The charge threw Sid off balance. He stammered, "I—you gone crazy, Sheriff? Didn't I say I as good as saw Tom Cannon do it? I heard him squabblin' with old Shanty, and I saw him ride out. He wouldn't have run if he wasn't guilty, would he?"

"Yeah, he would! I already knew Tom'd quarreled with Shanty agin tonight, and that he'd left the 66. He came straight here and told me about it. He's there in the next room, right now!"

Suddenly, with stark certainty, Sid Lukes knew that the sheriff wasn't bluffing. Somehow, his plan had gone haywire. Desperately he leaped backward toward the open doorway, grabbing for his pearl-handled gun. But the gaunt old sheriff was ahead of him. He lunged forward, slamming his tough body into Sid's, knocking him off balance. His own gun was out, and he swung it in a quick, choppy blow at Sid's head.

Sid stumbled and went to his knees, and by the time his head cleared the sheriff had his gun. Sid looked dazedly at him, at Tom Cannon who had run in from the next room.

Sid whimpered, "You got no proof I done it—it's my word against the kid's. How you aim to prove he didn't kill Shanty before he left the 66?"

Sheriff Bone said grimly, "You forgot there's such a thing as a telephone, Lukes? Shanty had a line runnin' from his place to Ted Malone's, and then on into town. After he'd quarreled with Tim, and Tom had rode away, Shanty called me on the phone and asked me to stop the kid and hold him till he cooled off. Shanty was killed *after* that. Still deny you done it, Lukes?"

But Sid Lukes was beyond denial. He was listening to the soft murmur of the night wind outside. To him the sound seemed loud, like mocking laughter.

"I'm worried about Ma..."

This boy is a casualty.

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AMERICAN RED CROSS

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Novelette of Outlaw's Destiny

★ Guns Up for the Owlhoot

Young Bud Daggett thought he had blotted the shameful brand his lobo father had left as his birthright — until that dreadful morning when his dad's killers came back, to make Bud boothill-bait for the very men he had called his friends!

CHAPTER ONE

Lobo's Last Stand

THE OLD outlaw was dying, no doubt about that. The shock of a bushwhack bullet showed in the gray pallor of his stubbled, dust-grimed cheeks,

By GEORGE N. LAWS

Orphan! ★ ★

Bud raised the gun in his good hand, and fired. . . .

and the least shift of his thin body sent numbing pain lancing through him.

But by sheer grim-lipped will he staved off the blackness of coma and held at bay the writhing torture in his guts—and the respectful distance held by the posse, scattered in the scant cover on the slope below, proved that the old owlhoot wolf still had teeth.

For years, luck and shrewdness had saved him from lawman lead, but there is no cunning that can foresee and turn the treacherous bullets of back-shooting sidekicks, turned blood-hunters. Now, downed by men he had ridden the river with, and with whom he had shared the loot and danger of ten powdersmoke years, Long John Daggett was going out as he had always known he would—his back to the wall, face toward a posse, and the worn stock of his Winchester cool against his taut jaw.

Now, as he lay panting out his life in his

impromptu rifle-pit—a natural fortress with cover at back, and open ground before—he turned to lay the full power of his will on the kid crouched beside him.

"It's time for you to haul freight, son," he said, stopping the button's angry protest with a jerk of his pain-wracked arm. "It's time to go. I'm a gone goslin', and I'm damned if I'll see you buck the law to play out a losin' string.

"You never killed yet, and you'll gain nothin' by earnin' the outlaw brand now. I've rode the owlhoot, and you see where it's got me. All the parsons this side o' hell can't give you no better sermon agin it than what you're seein' now!"

There was a stir in a manzanita bush a hundred yards below; a quick, jerky movement that would have brought the head of a less wary man popping up to investigate. But the old man only smiled grimly.

"One of them mail-order trailers is tryin' to Injun me," he scoffed. "Shakin' that bush with a pole, and him behind that rock to the right, with his shadow fallin' out beside him. Guess I'll just bark him up a little."

He steadied the stock at his shoulder, and the saddle gun laid its spiteful crack along the slope. The bullet bit into the shale by the rock, and a smothered yelp and the contortions of the shadow showed that the stinging rock had burned a bounty-hunter.

But the mule-kick of the carbine brought a curse between the clamped teeth of the hunted man, and he turned away so that the boy would not see the twisting agony in his face.

He turned back. "Get out now, son," he begged. "I've been a poor father, but you can at least remember, in years to come, that I kept you straight. And now, when I'm dyin', I give you the best advice I can—get out!

"I've got maybe an hour, maybe fifteen minutes. I can feel the blood sloshin' inside of me every time I roll over, and there's no use for a live man to die to save one that's already dead.

"You want to stay and side me, because that's your nature—but I'm your pa, and I'm still the ramrod. You can give me one gift, and that's to let me die with my mind at peace. I can't do that till I know you're over yonder hill!"

THE KID, no more than sixteen, fought the tears, and his tortured eyes showed his inward search for an argument to beat down the cold logic of his father.

But the old man was right. The terrible insistence in his low voice, and the conviction in his dulling eyes, left the boy helpless. He nodded assent now in dumb misery, and the dying man smiled, with a softness strange on his seamed, craggy face.

He motioned toward the brush at the back of their stone fort.

"Snake along them bushes to the horses," he whispered, adding with mordant humor, "take 'em both; I won't need one. Drop down behind that little ridge that runs along the rim. It'll take you a quarter of a mile away before you come in sight, and if they see you, you're out o' range. Then fog it over that hill, and keep on foggin' till you find a country where they never heered o' Long John Daggett! Now, git!"

For one long, bitter moment the hot young eyes fought back with wordless argument against the cold will in the faded blue ones, but at last, with a choking sob that was half-groan, half-curse, the kid turned away.

With a sick heart, he swung up the heavy old cavalry canteen, the saddle-bag with its slim store of ammunition, and the lean grub-pack—and this tacit admission that the old man would never again need food or water brought a choking lump into his young throat.

He turned then, and awkwardly laid an arm across the gaunt shoulder.

"I ain't forgettin' anything you taught me, Dad," he said steadily. "I'll play 'er straight, all the way. But I won't forget the skunks that led you into this gun-trap, and downed you to save their own stinkin' hides. Some day I'll come back and settle the bill.

"I promise you I'll never own a dime I don't earn, or kill a man just for notches. But there's no reason a straight man can't kill snakes, and you can leave these two for me!"

Before Long John could answer, the kid was gone, and the oldster noted with grim pride that not so much as the rustle of a leaf betrayed his getaway.

Relieved now of the gnawing fear for his son, the old curly wolf turned to his

vigil, and a well-placed shot or two served to halt those of the posse who were fiddling with the idea of rushing the fort.

In the clear, long-shadowed air of the waning day, Long John could hear the voices of the sheriff and his gun-dogs, as they debated ways to smoke him out. He grated his teeth in cold rage as he heard the hated voices of Silver Damon and Bandy Pollard, the erstwhile wide-loop mates who had set him up for boothill bait.

"He'll die afore sundown, Sheriff," rasped one, and Daggett knew the guttural voice for that of the fat, toad-like Damon. "My bullet took him plumb through the guts, and he can't go it much longer—so why risk gettin' shot apart?"

"Yeah, Sheriff, but don't forget he's got my lead in him, too," whined the Pollard treble. "We don't want no reward, but you got to see that we both git that pardon!"

Came the sound of a solid blow and a yelped curse, and a mumble which Long John made out to be the contemptuous voice of Sheriff Ben Weed.

A good man, thought the old outlaw, *and he don't like a backshooter any better'n I do. Hope I don't line him in my sights when the rush comes, but God! give me just a fair runnin' shot at Silver and Bandy!*

But that prayer for vengeance was not to be answered. Even in that oven-dry air, the blood that soaked Daggett's faded shirt dried only at its blackened edges, and every slight move, no matter how thrifty of his waning strength, brought a new pulsing of blood from his belly-wound. So it was that the caution of the posse and Long John's life ran out together, and when at last they rose, those hard-eyed possemen, to make their crouching, skittering run from rock to rock, there was no shot to stay them.

The boy, lingering a moment on the dark side of that unfriendly ridge to hear his father's gunsmoke requiem, knew at last the waiting was over, and with tears streaking his drawn face, he kneed his pony toward a draw that would take him more quickly to the grasslands below.

* * *

In the little cowtown courthouse, Sheriff Ben Weed brooded silently over his day's work.

Keen a lawdog as any, he felt somehow a sadness for the old outlaw whose dead husk pushed up sharp and pitiful angles under the blanket in the next room.

He could honestly feel glad that Daggett's kid had slipped the posse, for he knew that Long John, with a father's love winning over the wolf creed, had kept the boy as free from owlhoot taint as the sheriff's own son.

And he was doubly glad that the pardons, guaranteed by a politic-playing legislature, had carried with them an order to leave the state. It had been some satisfaction, he reflected, to give those gut-shooting sons an hour to raise a tall dust. Though, truth to tell, the sheriff would have preferred to punctuate the order with his old, long-barreled .45.

But mostly, as the sheriff sat in the yellow lamplight in his cubbyhole of an office, he thought about the kid, and his grief, and the lonely trail he followed.

* * *

A LONELY trail! Tough for a sixteen-year-old, even one with the rawhide fortitude of Bud Daggett. Racking along through the greenish moonlight over a haunted desert; lying under a mesquite in days too hot for sleep, when the shimmer of heat made the gray-blue foothills dance a crazy reel.

Tombstone, and a few days' work on the hard end of a muck-stick, to earn food and a few shells. Bisbee, and a day's labor to get grain for the ponies. The sun-smoked hell of the Sulphur Springs Valley, and fireless camps across the barren Chiricahuas, in the bloody domain of Cochise and his turbaned warriors.

Lordsburg, Deming, Las Cruces—and no words to tell of the blood-sweating heat, and the hunger, and the hell of loneliness for a sixteen-year-old kid.

And then at last a broad, green, peaceful valley, where underground water fed the belly-reaching grass; where cattle were fat, and where no grubline rider was ever turned away!

* * *

Bud Daggett never knew how five years could roll by so fast, or how a new life could bury a bitter memory so swiftly. Now there was laughter and light in his eyes, a

man's muscles corded his compact frame, and in every spread the length and breadth of that valley there was earned respect for his name.

Now, in the dying sun of a long summer's day, he rode toward the home place—the headquarters of the big Triangle Bar— and could feel in truth that it was home.

Never before, that he could remember, had he known any home other than the outlaw hideouts where Long John and his cohorts would headquarter for a time—and from which, sooner or later, the band would spur on to greener, or safer, pastures.

He would never forget the easy way that the bluff kindness of old Tack Lee, cowking of this valley, had made the Triangle Bar a haven for a lonely kid. A place to work, a place to grow, a place to become a man—and last and best, a home.

In his first days there, the kindness of Tack Lee and his tomboy daughter had been almost too much to bear. He recalled now how, feeling an obligation on him, he had gone to Tack to blurt out his outlaw parentage. And how the big, stocky man, giving him the honor of a man-to-man meeting, had cut him off:

"Don't tell me nothin', son," the deep, kindly voice had said. "In this country, we ain't interested so much in a man's backtrail. I don't reckon you're on any reward dodgers—not at your age, nor with them straight-lookin' eyes. Let's don't fret about what *was*, long's it's so much more fun to study about what's gonna be!"

And so Bud Daggett, son of an outcast, came to know the pride of other men's respect, and the security of honest living. And only rarely, on long nights of riding nighthawk with a gathered herd, did old ghosts rise to plague him.

The happiness and security of his new life had stilled not only his grief, but the fierce demand for owlhoot justice—the grim eye-for-an-eye urge that had, for many an earlier, sleepless night, kept the murderous faces of Silver Damon and Bandy Pollard before him.

Gradually, the peace in this broad valley had come into his heart. Like old Tack and all the valley folks, he lived and thrived on a life where any man could lie in his bed at night, or ride the range by day, and fear neither the wide-looper's foray or a dry-gulcher's bullet.

And there was more—much more. On the shaded veranda of the big ranch house, almost a mile away, Bud could see the real reason why all his life, so greatly changed, was tied to Tack Lee and this range. From this distance, he could see only the proud carriage of the sweet, lithe body, the blue of a dress, and the red of a neckerchief. But his mind's eye supplied all the wonderful details that made Mollie Lee the sweetheart of the valley.

He could see that she was talking to a tall man, a dull shape in the shade on the porch. One of the hands, he thought, in off the range for a sack of salt, or for a supply of makin's, or to bring a message to the boss.

He could picture Mollie's easy laugh as she stood, head tilted, her hands behind her, and he could picture the smile on her sweet red lips—his alone, just as the warm heart that made the laughter so easy and the love so true was his.

Just for that one bright moment he thanked God for the luck that had brought him to this valley—and then, as unexpected as lightning, from that clear blue sky, the picture changed.

Like a man in a bad dream, Bud Daggett saw the shadowy man down there step forward and, with the cold viciousness of a rattler, strike Mollie.

* * *

HE SAW her hand raised in futile defense, and then, through a haze of rage, saw her stagger back and fall to the ground below the porch.

So bright was the flame of anger that burned in him that he was not aware of the pony's sudden lunge as the spurs struck home, nor of the walnut-stocked Colt that was suddenly in his right hand.

But even as his pony was closing the distance, he saw the man fade around the house, and a moment later a rising pillar of dust showed that the renegade was heading for the rocky Tres Rios mountains that rose, dark and menacing, across the sky.

The killer urge shouted in Bud's veins for swift vengeance, but anxiety for Tack and Mollie brought him to a jerked-up standstill at the porch.

In a plunging run, with his mind engulfed in a chaotic whirl—fear for Mollie,

and burning hate for the man who had struck her—Bud covered the last few yards, to gather Mollie into his arms and feel for her pulse.

When he felt it, beating strongly in the firm white wrist, relief choked him. But black anger churned through him again when he swept back the golden hair, now matted with blood, and saw the long, deep gash on the temple where the vicious blow had fallen.

Even as he carried the limp form toward the steps, he was planning his moves. A fresh horse, his saddle gun, shells, a light bed-roll and iron rations—for he swore in his heart that he would not quit the trail until he had wiped out this outrage in blood.

So absorbed was he in his planning that at first he did not hear the cold voice of old Tack, but when he did, his racing mind stopped, dead blank.

And when the order came again, so shocking was its import that only instinct kept him from dropping Mollie's inert body. For, in a voice as cold and hard as chilled steel, the old cattleman was shouting, "Drop that gal and grab air, you coyote!"

For a moment he thought that rage had driven the older man loco. But there was no mistaking the threat of that unwavering gun-muzzle aimed at his face.

Bud gently laid the still unconscious girl on the porch, and warily stepped back, hands upraised. Tack Lee's cold rage burst on him then like the raging waters of a thaw-flooded creek.

"You outlaw whelp," Tack grated. "You yellow-livered Apache renegade! I'd gut-shoot you, but that's a man's death, and too good for you! Five years in my home, and I trusted you like a son! God!"

For a second, Tack's features worked in sudden agony, and now Bud saw that the old man was bootless. Up the inside of his bare left foot there ran the brutal, livid mark of burned flesh.

Torture!

The old man weaved on his feet like a drunk. "Damn you and your sidewinder friends," he rasped. "I'll stay on my feet and hold you here if it kills me! I'll hold you here to hang—to hang on that oak tree!"

Dazedly, with his whole world crumbled about him, Bud tried to make sense of this welter of tragedy. Things were happening with earth-shattering suddenness—Mollie knocked unconscious, her father brutally tortured—and Bud was being accused of siding the men who had done it!

Only one thing seemed certain, out of the whole crazy mess. Explanations could wait; his own redemption in old Tack's eyes could wait; but the men who were even now escaping into the hills would not.

Bud dropped his eyes and mumbled, "All right, all right—I'll stand hitched. But for God's sake, don't stand there and let Mollie bleed to death!"

He timed his next move with Tack's instinctive reaction, and as the stricken old man dropped his eyes to the girl, Bud stepped in and struck swiftly, surely, for the angle of his jaw.

Regretfully, almost tenderly, he caught the battered cowman as he slumped forward. "Hate to do it, old-timer," he said softly. "Maybe now I deserve killin', but you and I can argue it out later."

Swiftly he carried the two to their beds. He made sure that Mollie was breathing well and strongly, and was just easing the old man's body on the mattress when he saw from the tail of his eye a flicker of movement in the kitchen.

Wound up like a watch-spring as he was, it was pure reflex that whirled him into the kitchen, gun gripped in his fist—but it was

For Victory—

Food is as vital a weapon of war as bayonets or guns. Do your part to make sure that our boys on the battlefields are not let down by waste and greed on the home front.

PRODUCE, CONSERVE, SHARE, PLAY SQUARE With Food!

only the fat Mexican cook, Gordo Gonzales.

Gordo, which means the big; Gordo, whose heart was as big as his pudgy body. Gordo, who had loved him well, and who had been Bud's self-appointed guardian ever since the heartsore and lonely kid had first hit the Triangle Bar. Surely, if any man would have kept faith in Bud Daggett, it would have been Gordo. So it was another barb in his flesh to see the loyal old pot-rassler flinch away from him, with crazy fear in his eyes.

But there was no more room in Bud for pain. The cook possessed information which he had to have, and quickly; and he went about getting it in the most direct possible way.

Gripping the Mexican, now limp with fear, Bud propelled him violently toward the great black range which now, with the supper-fires working, shot a red glow from its vents.

"Talk fast," he grated, twisting his face into a snarl. "Who came here? Tell me, or you'll lie naked on the stove!"

Long ago, Gordo's father and mother had been tortured by Apaches in just such a way. Now, like cold water, this greater terror cleared the fear-wrought mind.

"Mercy of Christ, Señor Bud, I will tell you," he gasped. "Your compadres, the devil with the face of a frog, and the thin man who squeaks like a woman—they will meet you in the Tres Rios Hills, between Dead Man's Jump and the Dog's Tooth. I heard it all as I lay in the attic!"

"My compadres, you say? What were their names?"

"But surely you know, Señor Bud," Gordo muttered. "For the one called Damon spoke of you well, and of your father, the *grande bandido*, Long John. Oh, Señor Bud," and now the old man's voice rose to a wail, "how could you do this to those who loved you?"

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Destiny

FOR A FEW beats of his worried heart Bud stood like a statue, while understanding came to him with cold and brutal clarity. Some hateful finger of destiny had brought Silver Damon and Bandy Pollard here, to drag him down to death and disgrace, and to bloody this peaceful range.

For one bitter moment the thought came to him that the unfulfilled promise to his father—the pledge to wipe out Damon and Pollard for their treachery—had brought this terror to the valley. For one moment, and then all fruitless and futile surmise was lost in the wild clamor in his blood for revenge.

Like a lobo wolf fading into a forest, Bud slipped from the kitchen. In one long, easy movement, he was in the saddle and kneeing his pony around the side of the ranch house. He had a moment of faint regret that he went armed only with his hand-gun and a few shells, and that bedroll and food were not tied at his back. But there was no choice. Even as he rode off, he heard the jingle of bit and spur that announced the return of the ranch crew.

Shielded by the blind side of the house, he walked his pony out and away into the gathering dark, and when the first confused shouts signaled the crew's discovery of the shambles in the house, Bud was driving the horse in a high lope for the Tres Rios Hills.

Now, for the first time in a crowded hour, he could think. The train of thought was easy to follow, but it brought him nothing but pain, nor could he see in the twisted happenings any rhyme or reason.

For some dark purpose of their own, Damon and Pollard had chosen this strange means to draw him to a rendezvous—and to close forever his trail back to the ranch, and to a decent life. Well, they would see him, he thought grimly.

Well he knew the forbidding place which the pair had named as meeting-place. In all the dark and rocky reaches of the desolate Tres Rios Hills, no spot was less accessible. At that stark spot known as Dead Man's Jump, the great mass of obsidian had been cloven as though with a giant sword, and a sheer precipice ran down a thousand feet to broken rock and gnarled bushes.

Along this giant scarp, a thin trail led precariously to where a slim and ghostly spire, called the Dog's Tooth, scaled a full half-mile up toward the blue. Between the long fall of Dead Man's Jump and the mighty upward sweep of the Dog's Tooth the thin trail broadened into a level, grassy floor.

There was water, a steady stream from a

hidden spring; there was grass aplenty, and trees for shelter from the sun which struck straight down upon it. At its western end, the tiny valley was walled by a flying buttress that spread from the base of the Dog's Tooth. Only from the east could it be reached, and that by a path so narrow that one man, with a Winchester, could hold off an army.

It was a long twenty miles to the opening of that narrow trail—a bitter way for a tired pony, and a man now thirty-six hours in the saddle. Bud swayed from weariness, and the blown pony had slowed to a limping walk, but he dared not quit. For he knew, with Gordo to tell the way, that twenty hard-riding cowhands on fresh horses would be pounding the trail into the Tres Rios, to cut him down with lead or to drag him back, hog-tied, to a grim dance at a rope's end.

As he stopped to blow his pony and roll himself a cigarette, Bud Daggett tried to plot his own moves, plan them to fit the expected pattern of events. In the cool night, with the dark, quiet pine woods around, the chaos in his mind subsided, and he could think more clearly.

The ranch crew, as a posse, would be a factor to consider; but not until later in the game, he hoped. He knew that even on a weary horse, the start he had should keep him safe for a time. But unless he could blend luck and skill, sooner or later they would cut his trail.

All the force in him, all the strength and the will, were bent on the one objective of tracking down Damon and Pollard to their long-ago deserved deaths. Clearing his name, re-winning the affection of Mollie and old Tack, might be more important in the long run, but these could wait.

The moon had risen, and through a notch in the pines he could see the far-away pinpoints of light that he knew came from the Triangle Bar ranch house. A few lights flickered and moved like fireflies. Recognizing them as lanterns, he knew that the organized pursuit had not yet started.

Carefully he pinched out the glowing end of his quirly, and with the pressure of his knees turned the pony again on the uptrail.

The moon was riding high when Bud reached the near end of the rocky, narrow trail that skirted the Jump's thousand-foot drop-off. Here he tied his horse loosely to a low bush, loosened his gun in the leather, and started cautiously along the ledge.

* * *

HIS OWN drawn nerves and the unholy stillness pulled the skin at the base of his skull into a tight knot, but only cold silence greeted him when he stepped over a low barrier of rock and into the quiet, grassy park. No sign of a camp, no hobbled ponies—only the thin fringe of aspen and the hollow rock walls.

He had come prepared for anything, with his rage congealed into cold hate—anxious to parley first, to fathom this puzzle, but only as a prelude to a gun-play showdown. But this emptiness mocked him, and seemed only the final enigma in a deadly mystery to which he held no key.

It was only when he heard the high, grating laugh of Bandy Pollard, back at the opening of the trail, that he realized how neatly he had been trapped.

"Well, Silver, guess I called the turn," crowed Bandy. The raised voice, Bud knew, was to carry the taunt to him. "Just like his pappy, hell-bent to be a hero, and dumber'n a slick-ear calf!"

"Yep," rasped Damon, "he's a big boy now, but his thinkin' is a mite slow! He didn't aim to be, but he's our little helper, just like we told 'em. He follers us here, with his little gun all ready—and the whole damn' ranch comes a-hootin' on his trail.

"Then, while he's holdin' *them* off, and while they're settin' in the brush to smoke him out, all we do is move right into his happy home, with a full twelve hours to work on the safe!"

"Yeah," came the high, excited whine of Pollard, "and to work on the old man and that purty gal, too!" There was something bestial in the crowing babble, and Bud closed his eyes to blot out the picture of Mollie and Tack at the mercy of these torturers.

He understood now the motive that had brought this pair of snakes onto Triangle Bar range. It was common knowledge that old Tack had recently sold a sizable herd to an El Paso buyer, who had brought his own riders and taken delivery right on the ranch. The money for the sale, almost ten thousand dollars, reposed in the old iron safe in Tack's little office.

Silver and Bandy, drifting and thieving furtively along a few miles ahead of their reputations, must have stumbled onto the story. The fact that they had discovered Bud there, and used his presence to draw all protection away from Mollie and Tack for many hours, bore out what Bud already knew—that Damon and Pollard were equally as cunning and as cruel as old Cochise himself.

Burning with helpless rage, Bud forced himself to think. To chance a rush along the ledge would be, he knew, certain suicide. The moon would outline him plain and clear against the wall, and Silver and Bandy, safe in the pitch-black shadow, could blast him into bloody rags.

In an hour, more or less, the ranch crew would be here, but the renegades would be watching the lower trail. They could hold him safely in check until a scant few minutes before the posse arrived, and make a clean break in safety. If they timed it right, the space between their departure and the crew's arrival need be no more than a minute.

Then, with the crew taking up that vigil, no logic but the bitter bark of sixguns would ever turn them from the flat's only outlet.

There remained, then, that moment or so for Bud to make his play, and that minute's exact coming was hazy, too.

For, placed as they were, Silver and Bandy would hear the clink of bit and the scrape of hoof before he could; they could leave so quietly that he would not hear.

But he knew a way to force that minute, to stretch it, possibly, and to know the exact start of that tiny stretch of time in which he could hope to escape.

That way would be to guess the nearest he could to the ranch crew's coming in earshot—then to worm along the ledge, drawing the outlaws' fire—and finally, at the moment their fire ceased, to dash across that narrow ledge and try to sandwich himself between the departing renegades and the onrushing posse.

So he lay quietly until he could sense a new tension in the low-pitched mouthings of the two killers, and then, in plain sight, he stepped onto the rocky shelf.

A split second ahead of the twin gunflashes, he threw himself flat on the trail, but so close was the timing that chips from the cliff stung his face as the slugs screamed off the rock.

Inching his way along, offering as small a target as possible, he braced himself for the cessation of fire that would signal his chance for a safe dash along the ledge.

Quickly it came, and with the silence came the flick of shadows as the murdering pair headed uptrail.

Bud never knew or cared how nearly his high-heeled boots skirted death on the rim of that deep drop-off. The single purpose of pursuit carried him across that grim ledge without an interfering thought, and his heart surged with cold pleasure as he saw that Damon and Pollard, overly confident of their stratagem's success, had left his horse.

With one sweeping motion he ripped reins from the brush and hit leather. The startled horse broke strongly up the slope, and was crashing through the scant underbrush when a withering volley burst from the dark blob of shadow behind.

A mountain quail could not have flown safely through that murderous curtain of lead. Fiery pain lanced through Bud's leg, and he felt the stout-hearted pony bend with the impact and start to fall.

Even so, he might have fallen clear and escaped on foot in the dark, but a second volley spun him on his feet, and as he felt the numbing shock in his left arm, he knew that lead had met bone fair and square.

In that one moment of flashing pain, Bud bitterly saw his plans fall in ruins. He knew that the posse, wild with bloodlust at what they thought was his infidelity, would wipe out the only hope of saving Tack and Mollie.

And then another bullet, sent blind through the dark, mercifully sent him crashing into a smother of unconsciousness.

* * *

ON A RIDGE a few hundred yards away, the dim shapes of the two outlaws drew together.

"The damned fool," came the sibilant whisper of Damon. "Rushed right into 'em, and ruint our play! If they got him, they're done, and on their way back. And they'll be at the ranch purt' near as soon as us. Some of 'em'll stay here, huntin' us, but enough of 'em to stand us off will go along

to carry Daggett in." He ground out the sentence, and then, with an oath and a short laugh, he slapped his leg.

"What's eatin' on you, Silver?" demanded Pollard. "Got an idea?"

Damon turned his pony's head down the mountain, and a short laugh came back. "I've got *the* idea, Bandy. Let's git goin'!"

* * *

When Bud Daggett awoke, the grinding pain in his left shoulder and in his thigh shot through him with such intensity that for a moment he lapsed back into senselessness. But the uneven jerk of the horse upon which he was tied stirred new pain, and for a time he wavered between oblivion and awakening. Gradually, he sorted out sounds and voices, and realization came back to him.

The men of the crew rode mostly in silence, but he heard up ahead the crisp voice of Dan Timberlake, who had been range boss under him. In the dark, with only the quiet *clop-clop* of hoofs in the trail dust, he could make out other voices, and what they had to say was not pretty.

"If it wasn't for old Tack wantin' to see him hung, we'd be better off to shoot him right here, and save a good horse the trouble o' draggin' him down!" This, Bud recognized, came from Pinto Graham, a tow-headed boy of nineteen.

This frank hatred from the button who had once idolized him was almost worse than the pain in his leg and shoulder, and the terrible ache in his head. But he grimly acknowledged their right to hate him, knowing only what they knew.

At a jog in the trail, the horse upon which Bud lay tied slipped, and to avoid a fall, lurched full against the wall which overhung the narrow way. In spite of himself Bud cried out, and at the sound the little caravan stopped. Bud could not raise his head, but he felt his bonds being loosened. As life came back into his cramped arms and legs, he tried to lift himself.

Rough hands caught him and braced him into the saddle. The man who held him was Timberlake, but the tall, rawboned man with whom he had shared everything stonily avoided Bud's eyes as he roped his feet to the stirrups.

There were no words as the hands gathered about him, but Bud felt their scorn like the bite of a loaded quirt. A wolf is always known to be a wolf, and men hunt him down in grim and businesslike detachment. But a trusted sheepdog turned wolf is hated for the trust he has betrayed, and this hate goes into his hunting.

Then as they stood there, a murderous volley of gunfire burst from the thicket of aspen off the trail's edge. It was growing lighter, but in the still-deep gloom the ribbons of fire ran out on sharp blasts of sound. Horses screamed and reared, and men cursed and clawed for guns. Dan Timberlake fell without a sound, like a pole-axed steer. Pinto Graham's gun cleared leather, but as he whirled his horse for a shot, a slug broke the neck of the pony. He went over the edge of the trail like a plummet.

Barney Ryan stood cursing mechanically, his gun in the dust, blood dripping from a shattered gun-hand, but with his face turned toward the hidden foe. Ben Corley was face-down in the dust, and the ponies up ahead had spooked and stampeded down the steep trail at the first burst of fire. Only Bud was there, helpless on a horse which backed in small, panicky steps up the trail —and old Barney with his smashed hand— when two horses pushed out of the thicket, and Bud saw again the faces of the two men who had brought his life down in ruins.

CHAPTER THREE

Lead Evens the Score

HE COULD not speak, but he feebly drummed his heels against his pony's flanks, and would have bolted but for the fact that Damon swept out a hand and gathered up the reins. Pollard, with his long, loose lips gathered in a snarling grin, nudged his horse alongside the stunned and bleeding Ryan. He was drawing his gun when Damon spoke. "Let him live, Bandy," he growled. "Leave one of 'em alive to tell that crew that Long John Daggett's men stick together!"

Damon wheeled the two horses back along the up-trail, and before Bud could raise his voice in protest, had quirted his horse into a scrambling lope. Bandy followed, grinning back wolfishly at the staring Ryan.

A mile up the trail, where a thick carpet of pine needles came down to the trail's

edge, Damon turned off into the timber, and the other two horses followed. Ignoring Bud, Pollard pushed around him to the side of the squat outlaw. "What's the game now, Silver?" he whined. "Howcome we rescue this here Sunday-school bait, an' ride back up in the hills? Thought you was goin' to pull a whizzer an' git back to the ranch?"

"Hold yore yap," growled Damon. "What we just done sets up the whole play. Those few that got away will split. Part of 'em will stick here, lookin' to keep our trail in view. The rest will ride like hell for the ranch and raise every puncher in the valley. Two hours from now, there won't be a man that kin shoot or ride in twenty miles o' the Triangle Bar—they'll all be combin' these hills like hound dogs after a possum."

"Yeah," squeaked Pollard, "an' we'll be treed!"

Damon laughed shortly. "Nope, our friend here will be treed. You an' me will be ridin' into the front yard o' the Triangle Bar—just about the time the crew is scatterin' over these draws and ridges." He laughed again, fiercely. "We'll have plenty o' time to cut down the old man and sack up the cash he's got in the safe. And we'll have time to git away before ary man starts back!"

The squat outlaw turned and looked at Bud with a cool and distant eye, and in that moment, Bud knew that he was close to death. For himself he did not mind—but the knowledge that Damon's simple plan would work left him sick with helplessness.

They had worked down a draw, screened by thick aspens, perhaps a half-mile from the trail. Down this draw, Bud knew, a trail of sorts meandered along the shelving foothills toward the north, affording perfect cover for hunted men until they were within a mile or two of the home ranch.

Knowing Damon and Pollard as he did, he knew they had scouted this range well before they had opened their game, and he realized that long before the crew had combed this part of the hills, the two renegades would have accomplished their purpose.

He was weak from loss of blood, and had had no food since the noon before, so that he reeled dizzily in the saddle. For a while he had strained against his bonds, but he had been tied too well, and after his first surreptitious struggling, he had realized the futility of it and had husbanded his strength.

The pounding of blood through his skull seemed like the remorseless beat of a trip-hammer, and only a hate that burned like a volcanic fire kept him conscious. He realized that at some given moment, having judged the time ripe to start their ride toward the Triangle Bar, Damon or Pollard would kill him. He could reach down against the saddle skirt behind him, and feeling a loose concho, he sought futilely to saw the rawhide thongs against the dull metal edge.

At a shallow place in the ravine, Damon drew to a halt and Pollard pulled alongside. Their low-pitched voices came back to Bud.

"There's the last of 'em, just going out o' sight in the timber," Damon whispered. "It'll be thirty minutes before they reach the others on the trail."

Pollard looked at Bud with a grin, and licked his lips. "Time to kiss our little friend off, then, ain't it?" he asked, and his high voice quickened. He drew his gun, but Silver struck it down with an oath.

"You damn' knot-head," he snarled. "Want to bring the whole crew down on us? That shot'd carry plumb to the foot o' the hills. Use your knife!" He paused, his toad-like head on one side, thinking. "Wait a minute," he said slowly. "When they find him, we want it to look like he cashed in natural, so they'll keep lookin' for us up here in the hills. Cut him loose from the horse."

WHEN POLLARD slashed the thongs that held his feet under the horse's belly, Bud pitched forward and would have fallen, but Damon picked him up with a savage laugh. "Gotta make you look natural, kid. We want your ranch hands to realize that John Daggett's men stick together!" He laughed uproariously at his joke, but he eyed Bud with grim purpose.

"This has to look good," he said slowly. "If the Triangle Bar finds him dead here, with a fresh knife-slice in him, they'll know somethin's fishy. We'll leave the horse here, with the reins over his head. And we'll pitch Bud about here," measuring the trail with his eyes. "That way, they'll figger we headed up, further into the hills.

We'll ride that way a rod or so, and then ease back in the needles, until we get down this draw a ways."

Satisfied with his grim strategy, the squat, ugly man eased around. His eyes were deep with a fierce cruelty, but his mouth twisted into a grin. "Can't give you much choice, Bud," he murmured. "But is there any special side o' your head you'd like caved in?"

Bud strove to answer through stiff lips, but his mouth was too dry. He could not even dodge as the heavy gun whistled at his head; but in some instinctive reaction, he rolled with the heavy blow, went limp as the gun struck. It was enough to save his skull from being crushed like an egg-shell, but not enough to avoid the blow. A great blast of white fire seared through his brain, and then blackness swallowed him up.

Damon stood over him, his deep chest rising and falling, his eyes bright with hate. He bent to strike again, and then, with an effort, controlled himself. The lanky Pollard laughed silently, almost bending double.

"Let's get goin'," Damon rasped. "No sense in beatin' his brains out. This way, looks like he just took a bad fall. If he's still alive when they find him, they'll kill him quick."

Mounting, the two rode up the north bank of the cut, their horses' hoofs sending down little cascades of shale and dirt which rattled in the leaves and gathered in a little drift along Bud's shoulder.

* * *

The sun was almost an hour higher when the still form stirred jerkily, and it was minutes later when consciousness washed through Bud's aching head. He pulled himself to a sitting position, but the effort made him sick all over, and he could feel the sweat start out on his hands and forehead. A heavy movement in the brush brought him to his knees. When he saw it was the horse he had ridden, he stumbled up.

Twice his injured leg tripped him up, and pain rode him so hard that his mind was hazy, but the gentle horse stood still while he fought his way into the saddle.

Grimly, Bud fought off the sweeping waves of nausea. "Gotta hang on," he told himself over and over, thickly, muttering the words aloud. "Gotta—get—home."

It was easy going down the ridge, but Bud used his good hand to hold the horse to a walk. When he thought of what must be taking place at the house, fear knifed through him, but he resisted the panic urge to speed at a pace which might have brought him tumbling from the horse on some steep turn. Once off that horse, he knew he could never mount again.

Painfully, he kept to the cover of the woods, although it made the going slower.

Gradually his head cleared, and while he was still as weak as a kitten, he felt safe in pushing the horse a little faster.

He was down out of the aspens and pines, and into the shelving bench that leveled off into the valley floor in half an hour. Cautiously, Bud dropped down into the bed of a little creek that spilled across the valley. Through a fringe of willows a few hundred yards north of the ranch buildings he drew up, looking for movement about the house. In the ranch yard a man lay, face up. It was old Gordo.

Fifty yards farther on, the creek took an angle toward the buildings, and at this point, Bud saw, the gigantic old barn screened the house.

In the shadow of the barn he crouched again. Dismounting from the horse had been worse than he had expected; the pain had swept over him like a hot wave, and he was doubled over with nausea. But he was close enough now to hear a muffled pattern of sound from the house—heavy footsteps, a high laugh from Bandy Pollard, and once, a cry and a curse that must have been wrung from old Tack Lee. Gritting his teeth, Bud forced himself to his feet, and shambled across the sunlit stretch of yard that led to old Gordo's kitchen.

By the clean bench where the washpans stood, he leaned for a moment, stifling a sob at his weakness. His mind was on the heavy old shotgun which hung on antlers above the kitchen clock, and he knew that he must reach it silently. He could move only very slowly, fighting the pain at every gasping step, and he must have time to handle the old scatter-gun with one hand.

* * *

AS HE stooped to tug at his boots, tight on his swollen feet, he heard again the bitter voice of old Tack. "You damned sidewinders!" and then the sharp voice trailed off into a broken cry

of pain. Bud heard Damon's guttural laugh.

"Reckon we could cut a finger or two off that gal, Bandy. Maybe that'd make the old buzzard talk."

Pollard's voice whined an eager assent, but Damon suddenly cursed, and there was a sharp noise of struggling feet in the front room. Bud could hear the agonized grunting of old Tack, and his heart leaped at the gameness of the fierce old man.

Bud gathered himself like a spent runner, and quietly eased into the kitchen. Flat against the wall, he could not be seen from the front room, and he carefully lifted the shotgun down. There was still that horrible sound of struggle, and the cruel sound of heavy blows, but Bud grimly concentrated on making sure that both barrels of the gun were loaded.

Now he stepped deliberately into the doorway, with both hammers on the old 10-gauge eared back, and the struggle ceased.

In a corner, bound to a heavy chair, Mollie looked up with strained and horrified face.

Old Tack lay, panting but still conscious, across the wide couch, his head and shoulders sagging drunkenly against the wall. Blood dripped from cuts on his face, and his features were pulped from heavy blows, but the fearless old eyes stared up, unwinking and unafraid.

In that moment, both Damon and Pollard wheeled. For a split second, they stared unbelieving at the bloodstained, tattered apparition. And that was when Bud laughed.

Damon never had a chance. With a bellow that was ear-splitting in that close room, the smooth-bore barrel sent eleven heavy buckshot into his chest. At such close range the shot patterned no bigger than a saucer, and the stocky killer was flung against the wall with a jarring crash.

At the same instant, Bandy Pollard loosed one shot. Bud sagged against the door-jamb, but it was the mule-kick of the shotgun which had pushed him there. He centered the gun on Pollard's narrow chest just as the lanky outlaw chopped a second shot at him.

Splinters ripped from the door-frame, but the deep-voiced old gun spoke again, and Pollard spun like a ten-pin and pitched face-down on the clean pine floor.

Dazedly, Bud let the shotgun slide out of his hand. He stumbled toward Mollie, but the effort was too much. Like a man running too fast and off balance, his head started forward and down, while his feet vainly struggled to keep up with him. He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

* * *

It was a babble of voices which waked him, and remembering only a part of what had happened, he struggled up in panic. The pain in his shattered shoulder and his torn thigh was under control. He noted in dumb surprise that his wounds had been tightly bound, and with embarrassed shock realized that he was in Mollie's bed. A head, patched and bandaged almost beyond the look of humanity, poked through the door, and old Tack tiptoed in and sat on the bed.

Dumbly, the old man wagged his head, keeping a steady gaze on Bud. When he spoke, his voice was humble. "Son," he said, "I ain't much on words, and I can't tell you how many kinds of a skunk I was to doubt you. But them buzzards—" his voice trailed away.

"Mollie's fine," old Tack said. "She kinda passed out durin' the fracas. Gave me two patients to doctor. I had to do some quick explainin' to keep the boys from gunnin' you when they rode in, so I put you up here to gain time, an' because Mollie insisted. The boys want to come up an' shake your hand. But first, maybe you druther see Mollie?"

Bud started. For a moment, after Tack's first assurance that Mollie was safe, his mind had run backward, down a dark trail. He remembered the vow he had made his father, the vow he had forgotten, but now had kept. Struggling back from bitter memories, his eyes sought Tack.

"Sure you want your daughter talkin' with an owlhoot son?" he managed.

Tack gave him a hard, direct look. "Don't ever let me hear such talk out o' you again, as long as you live, or I'll pistol-whup you!" the old voice rang out. "Now, like I said, do you want to see Mollie first?"

Bud settled back with a deep, happy sigh. "First, last an' all the time," he allowed.

THE END

He shoved the blazing wood straight at Jake's horse!

By
L. P. HOLMES

MIRACLE IN DYNAMITE

POP CARR met up with the trail herd on the salt flats below Skull Ridge. Not a very big herd, nor, to Pop's discerning eye, in the best of condition. By the brand, a Horseshoe, they were Fred Rutgen's cows. When the herd had passed, Pop spied Rutgen, along with a couple of riders, back in the dusty drag.

Then he saw something else. Three wagons were trailing the herd. The first was a roundup wagon, which was fair enough, but the other two were big freighters, loaded high with household goods. Mrs. Fred was riding the box of one of these. Rutgen saw Pop and his wagon, and he rode over, gray with dust.

Terry and Donnell, Inc., had Chinquapin Valley sewed up tight with a huge beaver-works that kept precious water from every nester below Shawmut Canyon. . . . But old Pop Carr, ex-hardrock man, figured he could make those ruthless range-destroyers cure themselves with their own brand of poison!

"What's the idea, Fred?" asked Pop. "You look like you were moving out."

"I am," growled Rutgen. "Just came over to shake hands and wish you luck."

"Wait a minute," Pop said soberly. "You mean you're quitting this range?"

"That's right."

"Good Lord, man—why?"

"You'll know why when you see the river," said Rutgen ominously. "Not a half-inch of flow left. In a couple of weeks there'll be nothing but some slime-covered potholes. By mid-summer it'll be dry as a bone."

"Then they've shut off the overflow gates on the Shawmut Dam?"

Rutgen nodded darkly. "Just like I said they would. They're ready to put the squeeze on, and they're doing it."

"But the law," Pop argued. "They can't—"

Rutgen cursed harshly. "All I know about the law is that it takes too damn long to work. Especially when a couple of smart lawyers, like the kind Terry and Donnell have working for them, set out to tie knots in it. In the long run, yeah, Terry and Donnell will have to let water back into the river, but by that time Chinquapin Valley will be a desert, not a cow or a rancher left in it. And I'm leaving before that time comes."

"Natural forces will make them open those overflow gates," insisted Pop. "With no outlet for surplus water, the dam will fill and the water start coming over the top. Terry and Donnell can't afford to let that happen. Because it's an earth dam and if the water comes over the top, it will start eating away and the whole dam will go out."

"Those gates are a good ten feet deep. That means the water would have to raise ten feet or better behind the dam before it would start coming over. And it isn't going to raise that far this summer. It would take a heavy rain up above to bring down enough water to run the dam over, and that rain won't come until next fall, at the earliest. By that time the valley will be littered with the bones of dead cattle, providing any rancher is fool enough to try and stick it out. No, this is the finish. Terry and Donnell have done what they set out to do, get control of Chinquapin. I know when I'm licked. So long, Pop."

POP LET his team set their own plodding pace up and across Skull Ridge, for he had much to think about. It had been nearly three months since his last trip into Chinquapin Valley. At that time, all along his route, the one big question under discussion was the dam which Terry and Donnell were throwing up across Shawmut Canyon, ostensibly to bring a head of water high enough to supply an irrigation ditch into Bucksnort Basin, where the T. & D. was going to plant alfalfa. At the same time, Terry and Donnell had given the impression that they would see that enough water was kept flowing in Chinquapin to take care of all the herds in the valley.

Chinquapin was good cow-country, as long as water flowed in the river. Without that river water, however, no herd could live there. So the ranchers would have to move out, as Rutgen was doing. And then, when they were gone, the T. & D. could open the overflow gates, put water in the river once more and move their own herds into the valley, thus winning control of big and valuable range acreage. Such had been Rutgen's belief and that of a few others. But they had been a minority, while the majority felt the T. & D. would shoot square.

Pop knew vaguely that there were certain water laws, riparian rights as he'd heard a lawyer call them, one time. But as Rutgen had said, smart lawyers could delay and tangle and delay some more, while there could be no delay for thirsty cattle. The picture wasn't very bright.

When Pop's outfit finally topped Skull Ridge, he could look down into Chinquapin. For fifteen years Pop had been making his regular round into Chinquapin. Four to six times a year he made it, and Pop prided himself that sight of his wagon rolling along the valley was always a welcome one to Chinquapin ranchers. For Pop's wagon was an amazing thing. In a pinch it seemed that Pop could produce almost anything from under the weather-stained canvas which covered the bed of the rig.

He had a new griddle or pan or boiling pot, if any of the ranch women felt she needed one. Or a set of cobbler's tools with a side of sole leather, for patching boots and re-soling shoes for the kids. Pop did almost every kind of odd job a lonely ranch

might call for, everything from shoeing horses, to sharpening knives for the kitchen.

If a horse was wire-cut or jimmed up from a fall, Pop had a bottle of healing balsam oil to sell. He had liniment to sell, good for man or horse. He had a case of standard remedies for all reasonable human ills, and a reasonable skill in dispensing them. He had a few bolts of standard dressmaking goods, along with a box full of scissors, needles, thread, buttons, hooks and eyes. He had hair oil for the lothario duding up for dance night, and perfume for the lady of his choice.

He carried a case of assorted ammunition, a couple each of axes, picks and shovels, and a keg of nails, hammers and saws. No doubt there were other things, for Pop never seemed at a loss to produce just about anything on request. To the adults of Chinquapin Valley, Pop's wagon was a store, come right to their doorstep. To the kids Pop was a legendary figure, capable of magic, clothed with mystery.

But the most important thing which Pop brought to Chinquapin Valley was his own never-failing good humor, which shone from the slightly faded blue eyes under the shaggy, grizzled brows. Pop could listen to a man's troubles with endless patience and then advise him sagely. More than one ranch wife, dogged by loneliness and hardship almost to the breaking point, had poured out her miseries to Pop and felt the better for it.

Pop had cheered sick rooms, bolstered up sagging courage, helped dig graves, comforted the bereaved and even read burial services. And one wild night when a storm up above had made the river a raging, impassable torrent, he had saved Sven Sigurd's reason by helping a neighboring woman with Mrs. Sigurd, who, at black, raging midnight, presented Sven with a lusty son. After that Sven insisted on calling him Doc.

Yes, mused Pop, these Chinquapin people were his people. Their problems were his problems, their sorrows and joys equally his own. But no problem they had ever faced could compare with the one before them now. For Fred Rutgen was right. When Pop rolled up to the river ford he saw that he was going to wet little more than the rims of his wagon-wheels. And usually, at this time of year, the water at the ford was axle-deep. Yes, this was bad!

TEN DAYS LATER Pop Carr's wagon creaked to a weary halt before Joe Arbogast's store in Minerville. A sober-faced Pop climbed down and limped into the store, favoring that crooked leg of his a little more than usual.

Joe Arbogast said, "Old age catching up with you at last, eh?"

Pop sat down on a keg of nails. "Old age may have something to do with it," he admitted. "But mostly it's that steep, broken-up damn' country north of Chinquapin. Those hills up there, Joe, are steep, and it seems like anywhere you head is always up."

Joe squinted at Pop over the top of his steel spectacles. "You gone loco entirely?" he demanded. "What were you doing up there, hunting eagle's nests?"

Pop did not answer, but broke out his old pipe and got it going. Then he asked abruptly, "How soon can you get in a dozen cases of giant powder, with fuse and caps to match, Joe?"

Joe's spectacles dropped still farther toward the point of his long nose. "Now I *know* you're crazy," he exploded. "But go on."

So Pop told him—told him about the drying up of Chinquapin River and what it was doing to the Chinquapin Valley people. "That T. and D. dam is spreading ruin through the valley, Joe. The water in the river has quit running entirely, now. There's enough pothole water for the cattle to get by for another two, maybe three weeks. After that — !" Pop turned his palms upward and shrugged.

Joe pushed his spectacles back into place. "This giant powder you ask for—you aim to blow that dam up?"

Pop shook his head. "You can't get within a mile of the dam, let alone blow it up. Terry and Donnell got riders all over the place, guarding. All packing Winchesters and sixguns as well. No Chinquapin man has got a chance of getting in to the dam. Why, they even turned me back. I was heading in that way with my wagon and they barred the road. I told them I'd been traveling the road up Shawmut Canyon for years. They said that didn't matter a thin damn—I wasn't traveling it any more."

"The T. and D.," Joe said, "seems to be stretching their gallus' kinda far, ain't they? They don't own that Shawmut Canyon road, nor any small part of it. That's a county road, open to any and everybody."

"Sounds good, Joe. But their argument is guns, backed up by tough riders. Right now it's a winning argument, for they only have to make it stand up another three or four weeks. By that time there'll be nothing but dead cattle in the valley and broken-hearted, whipped folks."

"All right," Joe conceded, "the road is closed. What's that dynamite for?"

"To skim three or four feet of water off the top of Squaw Lake and send it down a side gulch into Shawmut Canyon above the dam. That'll fill the cussed thing up and run it over. Once the water starts coming over, the dam is done for. Being dirt, she'll start washing and let go complete."

"That's asking for a heap of trouble with Terry and Donnell, Pop," Joe said soberly.

* * *

WHAT'S a little trouble with them?" Pop said stoutly. "You should have been seeing what I saw in the eyes of them Chinquapin folks, Joe. A lifetime of work and struggle and hardship to get their roots set, and then have a pair of damn' greedy whelps like Terry and Donnell come and root 'em out, ruin 'em, send 'em down the long road to nowhere, whipped and beaten. Nope, Joe—we got to do something.

"Them Chinquapin Valley folks are my folks, your folks. How many years now I been stocking my wagon up right here in this store and hauling out to make things a little handier, a little easier on them? Plenty, Joe. I ain't made a fortune out of it. I don't want none. I've made enough for an old man to get along on. But I'm rich as they come in the things that really count, the friendship and confidence and respect of those people. When can I get that giant powder?"

Joe squinted thoughtfully over his spectacles. "Tomorrow morning, Pop. I'll send Bill Klegg down to Silver Junction after it. Leaving this afternoon and driving all night, he can make it."

"We can't advertise this to the world, you know," said Pop.

"It'll be kept quiet," Joe promised. "But who in the valley knows how to handle giant?"

"I do. You're forgetting how I got this game leg of mine. Me, I was a hardrock miner before a boulder came down on me and turned me into a cow-country peddler and odd-job man. Yeah, I can handle giant. Which reminds me. We'll need some drills and hammers. Have Bill Klegg bring them up, too. About a dozen of each. Now I'm putting my team up and getting some rest. I see a couple of damn' hard weeks coming along."

POP LIMPED stiffly to the door, stared out at the street and turned hurriedly back. "Lend me that counter gun of yours, Joe. Quick! Here comes Terry and Donnell now."

Joe hopped for the gun. "You can't kill 'em in here, Pop," he yelped excitedly.

"I'm not going to kill 'em anywhere, if they don't try and kill me," growled Pop. "I just want the gun—in case. Don't get so durned wild-eyed. Keep your shirt on and we'll see what those two hombres are after."

Horses clumped to a stop outside, spur-chains jangled and then Terry and Donnell came in. Terry was short, thick-set, cocky. Donnell was taller, inclined to slouch, with a long, thin face and a tight mouth. Terry was the talker of the two.

He ignored Pop, barked at Joe Arbogast. "What do you know about dynamite, Arbogast?"

Joe took a deep breath. "I'm a storekeeper, not a miner."

Terry waved an impatient arm. "I mean, you got any on hand?"

"I have not," stated Joe. "I don't like that stuff. Why I had a friend once who—"

"Expecting any?" cut in Terry.

Joe peered over his spectacles, a spark of anger in his eyes. "If you want an answer, Terry, wait till I get it out. I don't take kindly to people buttin' in on my speaking that way. I told you I didn't like dynamite. Now if that don't suit you, you can get the hell out. This happens to be my store. And I don't need no swaggerin', pompous little jug-head telling me my business. That goes for that long, pie-faced pardner of yours, too. The both of you. Be damned to you."

Terry's face reddened, but he laughed. "No harm meant. Just trying to find out something, that's all. Donnell and me are just making sure those Chinquapin hombres don't get their hands on any dynamite. If they did, they might get ideas about our dam. And that would be bad—for them."

"Seems I heard somewhere you made those folks a promise, Terry," said Joe. "Something about seeing there'd be enough water kept running in the river to take care of all their stock needs. Why should they be wanting to blow up your dam if they're getting enough water as it is?"

"They ain't," said Terry callously. "The T. and D. needs all that water." Now he looked at Pop Carr. "I hear you and your peddler's wagon tried to go over the Shawmut Canyon road. You got turned back. Next time you'll get hurt. So stay out of there."

"I'll go over it, one of these days," Pop told him bluntly. "That's a county road, free to any man. Next time I pack a gun, and anybody who tries to stop me gets shot in half at the pockets. You're running a long bluff, Terry, you and Donnell. And it's due to be called."

Terry laughed arrogantly. "You'll go over that road only when T. and D. says you can. Not one minute before. And if you want to make it a gun argument, why we got a number of boys who'll be only too glad to oblige. Come on, High. We've wasted enough time with these two old fools."

They clanked out and rode away. Joe Arbogast spat. "Those two rannihans are asking for a fight. Okay. They got one. Pop, that giant powder, the drills and hammers and other fixings will be here tomorrow morning if I have to go after it myself. And it ain't going to cost you or the Chinquapin Valley folks one red cent. That's my donation toward putting a crimp in those two buckos. Old fools, huh? We'll see about that."

Toward noon the next day, Pop Carr's old wagon was again toiling up the grade over Skull Ridge. Just past the crest, two riders came swinging out of the brush on either side of the road. T. & D. men, by the brands on their horses. "Hold her up!" yelled one of them. "What you got in that wagon?"

Pop set the brake, broke out his pipe. "This and that," he drawled. "A little of everything."

One of them said, "Take a look under that canvas, Dan, while I keep an eye on the old duffer."

Dan cut around to the back of the wagon, pulled the canvas flaps aside and peered in. Pop grew a little taut, up there on the seat, and rested one hand on the jockey box. There was a sixgun in there. He figured to use it if he had to.

Dan called, "All I can see are picks and shovels, Jake."

"Picks and shovels!" Jake stared at Pop. "Who are they for? Somebody must aim to do a heap of diggin'."

Pop nodded casually. "They do. The Chinquapin Valley folks. Asked me to bring in a load. They're going to dig for water.

"Yep. Got to get water somehow for their cows. River's drying up. Only other way I know to get water is to dig for it."

Jake went into gusts of uncontrollable laughter. He doubled over in his saddle, slapped his thigh. "Get that, Dan?" he whooped. "They're going to dig for water in Chinquapin—water for their cows. Well, if I know cows, they're going to have to do one hell of a lot of deep and fast diggin'. Will Sam Terry and and High Donnell get a roar out of that!" And Jake yelled with laughter again, his companion joining him.

Jake recovered enough to wave his hand. "Go on—take 'em their picks and shovels," he bawled. "Do 'em good to start digging. Take their minds off their troubles and put 'em on their backs."

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Pop kicked off the brake, clucked to his team. The wagon rolled on and Pop, staring straight ahead, had a gleam in his eye. "Yeah, smart guys," he murmured. "They're going to dig for water. But I didn't tell you where. And will Sam Terry and High Donnell roar when they hear about that—too late! And would they skin you alive if they knew that under those tools and other stuff was a dozen cases of giant. Now we'll see!"

* * *

THAT NIGHT, in Jim Gardner's house, a room full of grim-faced men listened to Pop Carr. "It's going to mean a jag of the hardest kind of work," Pop told them. "But it can be done. I was a hardrock man myself, once. I know what can be done to rock with powder if you place it right. Last time I was in, Sven Sigurd and me rode up to Squaw Lake, because I'd been fishing up there a couple of times and I thought I'd remembered certain things. I was right. There's two rock faces which have to be blown and a good-sized ditch dug across that little glacier meadow just below the lake, enough of a ditch to center the water when it comes out of the lake. After that the water will open the ditch up fast. The water will lead into that side gulch on the west and hit from there straight into Shawmut Canyon. After that we'll let Terry and Donnell worry. But it will mean killing work to get it done in time."

"When have we ever been afraid of work?" said Milt Evans. "I'd tear a mountain down with my bare hands to get the river flowing again."

A mutter of agreement to this ran around the room. "That's right," said Jim Gardner. "What you say goes, Pop. And no questions or back-talk."

"Good!" said Pop. "We start right now. There's powder and tools to be moved up to Squaw Lake before daylight. Break out your pack horses."

Within the next few days an air of tension began creeping over Chinquapin Valley. The eyes of lonely ranch women shone with it, and from time to time they would walk out of their houses and look long toward the rugged heights up north, where lay the limpid, ice-cold waters of Squaw Lake. During the day, very few men could be seen about Chinquapin Valley. But after dusk they would come riding down out of the hills, dog-weary, hands calloused and battered, muscles knotted with fatigue. They would wolf their food, sleep like dead men and be back up at Squaw Lake again before dawn.

Pop Carr and a couple of others camped right there at Squaw Lake. Pop had gone over the two vital rock faces with expert care half a dozen times, figuring mass and angles of fracture again and again. Finally he had marked the spots where the holes were to be drilled, and the men set to work in pairs, one holding and turning drill, the other swinging the hammer. At the end of every half-hour they would switch. Other men, with those same picks and shovels which Pop had brought in on top of his load, dug the ditch across the little glacier meadow. And still others, the older men, mounted guard.

Pop had talked turkey with these guards. "The last thing we want to do is to shed blood," he told them, "but if we have to, we will. The T. and D. run guards around their dam. All right, we run guards around our little job, too. With luck, they won't come snooping. We're too far away for them to hear the smack of hammers on drills. But they'll be plenty close enough to hear the big smack when she lets go."

Men labored doggedly, drenched with sweat. None too expert at first, they battered and skinned up their hands. But they ignored bruises and cuts, and toiled on. Gradually, holes deepened in the stubborn rock and were finished to the desired depth, with Pop measuring carefully.

The lower rock face was done first, being the smaller, and immediately, with Sven Sigurd to help him, Pop began charging the holes. He showed Sven how to take each slippery, waxy stick of giant powder and slit the paper wrapping up the sides, so the stick would crumble and pack into the hole; showed him how to use the tamp stick. The capping and fusing Pop did himself, covering each fuse carefully to keep it dry until time of lighting.

The meadow ditch was completed next, and finally the rock face behind which the lake waters were locked. Pop said, "I'm proud of you, boys. Now you got one more chore to do. Go down to the valley and comb the river banks for cattle. Push them

well back onto the higher ground, because when that Shawmut dam lets go, that river is going to be the damnedest torrent you ever saw until the crest gets by. Any cow or man or horse caught by that flood is a goner.

"Sven and me will stay here to charge these last holes. We should be through by dark. Tomorrow morning, right after sun-up, we touch her off. Have everything in the clear down below—and one more thing—Jim Emery, you're a crack shot with a Winchester. I'll expect you up here by dawn with that long-range coyote rifle I brought in for you last fall. You may have to do some fancy shooting. Agreed?"

"I'll be here with bells," promised Jim.

* * *

LEFT ALONE, Pop and Sven worked like beavers. They had every hole charged and ready by dark. Grinned Sven, as he stirred up their campfire by the lake edge, "I can hardly wait, Pop. I can yust hear that big bang, ven she lets go. Then we worry about the trouble that comes because we open up the lake."

"There won't be much trouble, Sven," said Pop. "We're not blowing deep enough to empty it. We're just skimming the top three or four feet. Afterwards, we can fill up the gap easy enough and after the snow leaves next spring the lake will be back to its same old level. Lord! I'm tired."

They ate and were about to roll into their blankets when Sven cocked an alert ear. "Listen!"

Pop heard it now, the clump of horse's hoofs. "Maybe something has happened in the valley," Pop murmured. "Stay put!"

They waited and into the firelight rode Dan and Jake, the two T. & D. riders who had stopped Pop on Skull Ridge.

"What goes on here?" growled Jake. "What you hombres doing here?"

Pop said, "Minding our own business."

Jake looked around, vast suspicion in his eyes. He spurred in closer to the fire, right above Pop. "You ain't camped up here for your health," he rasped. "You're up to something."

Thankful that the dark hid evidence of the work that had been done, Pop said easily, "Maybe we're fishing. It has been done, you know."

Pop had been packing his pipe. Now he leaned over the fire, tried to scoop up a coal to light it. From under his hat-brim he stared hard at Sven, caught Sven's eye and nodded very slightly. And then Pop caught up a sizeable chunk of wood, blazing at one end—and shoved it straight up at the head of Jake's bronc.

The animal reared wildly, and Jake came within an inch of being piled right there. Before he could recover, Pop was on his feet, dragging him from the saddle. When Jake hit the ground, Pop was on top of him, slugging away with both fists. And Sven, half Pop's age and powerful as a bear, shot across the fire and descended on the dumfounded Dan like a berserk hurricane.

Pop found out two things. One was that he wasn't as young as he used to be. The other was that this fellow Jake was slippery as a snake and wiry as a cougar. Pop knew he was going to need help, so he yelled for it while he could. "Get done, Sven—and gimme a hand! Ugh!"

Jake had a fist free and belted Pop in the face. Pop saw stars and comets and his senses reeled. He knew he couldn't take another like that and stay in the fight, so he flattened right down on Jake, buried his face in Jake's hairy chest and hung on for dear life.

Jake rolled and kicked, cursed and pounded. But Pop stayed with him desperately, waiting for Sven. And Sven, who had heard Pop's yell and read the urgency of it, dragged his man from the saddle, hit him once with a pile-driver fist, dropped him and scurried over to the tangle of Pop and Jake. Sven sorted out the tangle, located Jake's head and brought down a post-maul of a fist. Jake grunted and went limp. Pop staggered to his feet, gulping for air. "Huh—Huh—Holy cow!" he sputtered. "Don't ever hit me, Sven!"

* * *

Pop and Sven were up and shivering in the pre-dawn chill when Jim Emery rode in with his pet rifle, a new-fangled, bolt-action affair with a telescope sight on it. The price of half a dozen cows was tied up in that outfit, and Pop had thought Jim Emery crazy when he ordered it. After he had seen Jim pick off a coyote, clean, at a good four hundred yards with it, Pop apologized.

Sven got the fire going and Pop leaned

close over it, warming his aged bones. The flames lighted up his face and Jim Emery stared. "If I didn't know better I'd swear you had a black eye, Pop," said Jim.

They had breakfast, and then, while Sven got the outfit and blankets packed, Pop took Jim Emery aside. "You know where Panther Rock is, Jim. All right, you go out and climb on top of it. You stay there with that danged mile-and-a-half gun of yours. From the top of Panther Rock you can look down on the Shawmut Dam. It's between six and eight hundred yards away, I'd guess. Anyhow, you can reach it with that gun. There are guards around that dam. When they see this lake water helling into the river and raising the water behind the dam, they're going to stampede for a while. Then they'll think about opening the overflow gates. That's where you come in. Don't let 'em. What we want and got to have, is for that dam to go out. And it won't unless the water starts running over the top. So you splash lead around anybody trying to open those gates. A few slugs from someplace they can't see or reach, will discourage 'em quick. Good luck!"

Jim Emery hurried away. Between them, Pop and Sven lugged the glowering, cursing, half-frozen but utterly helpless Jake and Dan far enough away to be beyond danger of the blast. Pop grinned down at them. "When you hear the big bang you'll know that an awful headache for Terry and Donnell is in the making, gents. Hang on to your ears."

BY THE TIME the sun came up, all was in readiness. Pop gave Sven a little coaching on how to light fuses. "You take the lower rock face, Sven. Less shots in that one, so you'll make out all right. Light the long fuses first. You got a foot a minute on 'em. Don't try and rush things or you'll get to fumbling. Just make each move smooth and sure. When I wave my hand, start lighting."

Sven hurried down to the lower rock face, uncovered all fuses, got them ready. He looked up at Pop and Pop waved his hand.

Pop still had five fuses left to go when Sven came panting up beside him, his job done. Pop got four of the remaining fuses and Sven one. Then they scrambled away to shelter.

Pop looked at Sven and saw that Sven's eyes were bugged out from holding his breath. Pop nudged him and laughed, "You look almost as wild-eyed as you did that night when little Sven came along. Remember?"

Sven let go his breath and grinned. "I'm yust as excited," he admitted.

Then he began to worry. "Why don't it go? Maybe we did it wrong. Maybe—!"

WHOOM! WHOOM—WHOOM!

Before their eyes square yards of solid rock seemed to swell and stretch, almost slowly at first, then at a dizzy, terrifying speed, bursting into a thousand smaller fragments which soared and whizzed. Pop dragged Sven flat beside him, while the blasts continued to roar and rumble and shake the earth and hunks of rock pelted and crashed everywhere.

Pop, old hardrock man that he was, was counting, and he knew a little thrill of pride when the last hole went off. He still knew how.

When the last of the soaring rock chunks had pelted safely down, there was a new sound to conjure with, the roar and smash of released water in great volume, long pent-up. It came boiling savagely from the raw, smoking gash in the main rock wall, flooding across the little glacier meadow, funneling down the ditch and on through the second rock wall, then crashing, foaming, cascading down the side gulch.

Pop hit Sven a wallop between the shoulders. "We win!" he yelled above the din. "We win! Now let's get over to Panther Rock and watch the fun."

They found Jim Emery somewhat aghast as he watched the torrent foam and crash down the side gulch, tumbling boulders and trees before it, finally to end up in the dammed-up pond below in a welter of thundering waters.

As Pop had prophesied, there was plenty of excitement at the Shawmut Dam. Men ran out on it, stared at the down-foaming torrent and raced back. Then of a sudden, there were men working feverishly at the overflow gates. "All right, Jim," said Pop.

Jim got busy. His rifle began to snarl and spang. They could see his long-range lead splash closer and closer to the dam. The last shot seemed to splash water on one of the tiny figures below. That one scattered them.

"Look!" yelled Sven.

A great upthrown fountain of water leaped up across the face of the overflow gates, and then the deep thrum of muffled explosion echoed up to them.

"Dynamite!" said Pop. "They're trying to blow the gates. The fools! They'll open the dam wide, that way. Let 'em go!"

More fountains, more explosions. Said Pop, "They're fusing and throwing a stick at a time. In a minute somebody will get an idea and throw in a whole bundle. That'll start things."

Somebody did. The explosion was very heavy, the upthrown geyser of water a huge and foaming cauldron. That one sent the gates out all right, but it sent a section of dam with them. The water which shot through the gap was muddy when it hit the river-bed below.

"Goodbye Shawmut Dam," said Pop.

It seemed to melt before their very eyes, that dam. Its death was a vast, howling rumble and roar of surging waters, which bit and clawed and sucked at this barrier that had held them prisoner, until the last atom was gone and all the lower canyon was an earth-red torrent.

* * *

"So," said Pop Carr, "that was how it happened, Joe. Something to remember, seeing that dam go out."

He was back in Minerville, Pop was, and he'd just finished telling the whole story to Joe Arbogast. Joe's eyes were shining. "Musta been a dinger when she let go. Like to have seen that myself. I bet them Chinquapin Valley folks are tickled."

"I'd call them tolerable happy again," said Pop, almost smugly. "One thing, their water troubles are over."

"Damn!" said Joe. "Here comes Sam Terry and High Donnell. You got a six-gun, Pop?"

"You bet! I pack one regular, now."

"And I got this," said Joe, lifting a sawed-off shotgun from under the counter. "Don't take nothin' from them."

Terry's walk was not so cocky and Donnell's long, thin face was sourer than ever. Terry looked at Pop venomously. "You—you blew out our dam, Carr!"

"Oh, no," said Pop. "You're wrong there. I blew out a couple of rock faces up at Squaw Lake. I never touched your dam. Your own guards blew that out. I saw them."

"And I'll blow the pair of you," threatened Joe Arbogast, waving his shotgun threatening. "I'll blow the pair of you if you go trying to make trouble for Pop and me. That goes from now on."

Terry and Donnell looked at the shotgun, looked at the pistol in Pop's hand. They turned and went out, and there was no cockiness at all in either of them.

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By ARCHIE JOSCELYN

He waited till the bandit was ten feet away. . . .

SHOOT FIRST —DIE LAST!

When Johnny Rance took that Hellmark stage-driving job, he didn't expect to be trapped by a ruthless gang of gold-greedy killers—with no weapons but a wrecked stage, and a pair of harmless guns!

A RIFLE cracked sharply, and at the same moment, with brakes squealing, the stage plowed to a sliding stop. The suddenness of it spilled Johnny Rance off the seat and onto his knees, and the drummer, half-hysterical already, clawed at him as he tried to get up and reach one of the holstered guns he carried. A door at the side was jerked abruptly open and a gun thrust into his face before he could do so.

The masked face behind the gun carried out in full measure the promise of the weapon, and at that same moment the rifle blared a second time outside. Something clopped soggily against the corner of the stage, struck a front wheel, then spilled into view in the dust of the road, making red mud where it sprawled. It was the express guard.

"Anybody else ready to die sudden?" the masked man inquired mockingly.

In the face of that, Johnny submitted regretfully to having his holstered guns lifted. Those were a mighty good shooting pair of .45's. It was adding insult to injury to take his cartridge-belt as well, but there were four bandits staging this holdup. The only unusual thing about it was that this robbery was happening on the road *to* Hallmark, more familiarly known along the border roads as Hellmark, rather than out from there. But it developed that one of the passengers had two thousand dollars hidden in a money belt.

Otherwise, such stick-ups and murders were pretty much the expected thing hereabouts. And that was a sobering thought.

He was still thinking about it when he got off at the station in Hallmark. "I'm Johnny Rance," he informed the agent, "reportin' for duty."

Mack Fulmer nodded and held out a hand. He was a big man, by contrast with Johnny, and he had a toothy grin.

"Glad to know you, Johnny," he said. "Your looks are plumb deceivin' but from what I hear you know your stuff—and you'll need to. You ran into a sample of what we're up against on your way here today."

"I aimed to take a hand in that deal myself," Johnny explained apologetically. "But that fat drummer fell all over me and I couldn't draw a gun. He paid for it, too. They took two thousand away from him."

"Maybe you were lucky," Fulmer said laconically. "Our stage back is due to leave in half an hour, and we're shorthanded on drivers—you can guess why. Can you take it out?"

"That's what I was sent down here for. Just give me time to go get myself some guns and shells again."

"I've got some here—pistols. No revolvers in town. Those new repeatin' guns are hard to get out this way. Too bad you lost yours. And I can't give you a guard, today—casualties have been too high, and most men shy away from the job. You'll have a gold shipment, but no passengers. Think you can cut the mustard?"

"I'll have a try at it," Johnny agreed grimly. He'd been told in advance that things were tough down here, but the reality was even worse than the reports. Strapping on the cartridge-belt and guns, he climbed to the seat as the stage was brought up, took the reins handed up to him, kicked off the brake and was away. It was thirty miles to Powderville, mountain roads all the way.

And with a big shipment of gold along, he could almost certainly count on the usual thing's happening—the thing which had cost the lives of three drivers and two guards in the last two weeks. As trouble-shooter for the whole stage line, it was his job to try to find out why this stretch of road was so unusually dangerous, and put a stop to it. Fulmer, of course, didn't know that—he merely knew that Johnny was a driver for the company and had been sent down to help out in the emergency. But Johnny had counted on at least having a guard along with him on his first trip.

For a couple of miles the road ran along the foot of the mountain; then it began to twist and climb, until, nearly a mile on up the steep slope of the mountain, he could see the scar of it again, still running parallel to its direction down here.

He noted with interest various scars and slivered spots on the seat and front of the stage—scars made, not too long since, by bullets. There was also a dark stain which had not been too well washed out—and this was not the stage that he had ridden to Hellmark.

Thoughtfully he drew one of the pistols, a shiny new gun. He hefted it in his hand and aimed at a crow, just taking awkwardly to wing as the stage swung around a bend, rising from a dead pine stump. The crack of the pistol was mostly lost in the rumble of the stage, and the crow, squawking dismally, winged out of sight. Johnny frowned.

"Now that's durn queer," he muttered. "Either these guns don't shoot too good, or I'm getting to be a poor shot. Wish I had my own."

But his sixguns were gone, and Fulmer had assured him that these pistols were the best to be had. Thrusting it back in holster, still holding the reins expertly with one hand, Johnny pulled the other gun, squinting against the sun, and selected an apt target—an old, darkly gray ball hanging from the branch of a cottonwood, a little distance off the road. The abandoned nest of hornets.

It was too big and easy a target to interest Johnny, ordinarily. But now it would enable him to test out the gun. He pulled the trigger. Then he stared, first at the undisturbed ball of gray, then back to the gun in his hand. He opened his mouth, and closed it again.

HE WAS only about five miles out of Hallmark, near the top of that climb he had first sighted. Now, with sudden decision, Johnny pulled the team up, kicked on the brake, and stared accusingly at the gun in his hand. It looked like a good gun. So did the other. And the cartridge-belt was stuffed with new, fully-loaded shells.

But, though the stage had been running across the grassy carpet of a little mountain meadow, making scarcely any noise when he fired that last shot, the sound of the gun had been a disappointing pop. Johnny extracted the empty shell, eyed it, then chose a new cartridge at random. With powerful fingers he twisted at the lead, and it came out with unexpected ease. Behind it was emptiness.

Here, then, was the secret of murdered men, of the ease with which holdups occurred on this division, of drivers and guards who never seemed to be able to hold their own in a gunfight. Mack Fulmer, trusted agent at Hallmark, was a traitor.

Those drivers who had died had been given guns and ammunition and sent out to fight in a cause which, so far as they were concerned, was already lost. They had tried to fight back, when the holdups had come, as was proven by the fact that they were now dead. Unknowing until it was too late that they had been betrayed, given guns with cartridges from which nearly all the powder had been drained, they had gone into action with blazing guns—an invitation to death!

That also explained why every gold shipment was stopped. Fulmer knew whenever gold was on board, and passed the word along. Which meant that a holdup today was absolutely certain—if he kept going. . . .

The sound of hoofs on the hard road behind solved the question. Glancing back, Johnny was just in time to see a pair of horsemen, not two hundred yards away, before they dipped out of sight in a draw. They were riding hard to overtake him.

One of them was Mack Fulmer. The other was the man who had posed as a drummer, who had sprawled all over Johnny and prevented his getting into that other fight!

Johnny whistled softly. This seemed to mean that they *did* know who he was, or at least had pretty strong suspicions. They had made very sure that he didn't get to use his sixguns, given themselves an excellent excuse to hand him the new guns—guns which wouldn't shoot!

Johnny didn't like it. He kicked off the brake and yelled at his eager horses.

Almost instantly, from behind, came a burst of shots—not the faint poppings of his own weapons, but bullets with plenty of powder behind them. They were not aimed at him, since he was still out of their sight. But after a short interval, from somewhere on the road ahead, sounded an echoing burst of gunfire. That would be some of the crew who had staged the earlier holdup, of course.

So they were coming at him now from in front and behind, aiming to trap him like a rat. His galloping team was holding its own with the two horsemen behind, snaking the nearly empty stage along at a dizzy pace, but every turn of the wheels only brought him that much closer to the others waiting in front!

Climbing a steep slope, the horses reached the top, and a view which under normal conditions would have delighted the poetic heart of Johnny was spread before him.

Below, the mountain stretched away for nearly a mile, and down there, almost below him, he could see the short stretch of road which he had come at the start, not more than a couple of miles out from Hallmark. The smooth slope of the mountain down to it was a pretty thing.

Now, like a conjuring trick, two other horsemen were on the road ahead of him, suddenly popping into view less than half

a mile away, and hurrying to meet him as if he were a prodigal son. Only the glint of sunlight on their drawn guns told a grimmer story of their eagerness.

"Two devils ridin' behind, and the deep blue sea ahead," Johnny muttered wryly, and noted that, at most points along the road ahead, a wheel over the side would send the stage plunging in a straight drop for hundreds of feet. But right here the slope off, while sudden, was a possible one. Without an instant's hesitation, he turned his plunging cayuses off and down the mountain.

THE leathern springs of the coach creaked in anguished surprise, a wheel bounced over a fallen tree lying half-hidden in the grass, and the horses, heads pointing down the mountain and the stage pushing from behind, ran for their lives to escape the shove of it.

Johnny set his teeth, braced his legs, and gave his full attention to picking a trail.

Johnny's ears told him that one of the four must be the rifleman who had helped in that first holdup today, still using the same long gun. At the second shot, the fellow demonstrated that he knew how to use it. Johnny saw his off-wheeler pitch wildly and then sag in the traces.

For a couple of seconds, the momentum of horses and stage, heading downhill at that break-neck pace, had carried the dead weight along with it. Then, as the horse fell, the weight of it wrenched the other horses and the stage-tongue to one side, and a good-sized boulder loomed up squarely in the path of the wheels.

The next instant the stage seemed to have come to a dead stop. That poised feeling lasted only the fraction of a second, and then the whole thing was up-ending, flopping in mid-air, hitting the ground upside down and shattering kindlingwood, doing it in a two-hundred-foot space down the slope ,all with a sort of majestic deliberation.

It was that deliberation which saved Johnny. Even then, there was no time to jump, and jumping, on such a slope, was a dubious job in any case. But the vaulting stage took care of that. It catapulted him through the air and, letting go the handful of reins, Johnny found himself playing eagle. But he couldn't keep on flying; the ground was coming up fast, and the downward slope was really a dizzy one now.

It was that slope which really saved him. He landed rolling, just ahead of the crashing stage, and without much shock. Some distance farther down, where the hill flattened out a little, he rolled into a thicket of brush and came to a stop.

For a few seconds the world was unsteadily on end and threatening to fall on top of him. But presently, as it got a grip on itself again and settled down, Johnny sat up, gripping a clump of grass in each hand, and took stock. Aside from a few minor bruises and scratches, he seemed to be all in one piece. Some of the wrecked stage was scattered just above, and he noticed the gunnysack in which the gold shipment had been tied.

He got to his feet, teetering for a few moments, and the rifle roared again. Johnny heard the ugly whine of the bullet close to his ear.

He was halfway down the slope, Johnny saw. And, only another hundred feet on down, the five surviving horses were waiting for him. The twisting stage had torn itself loose from them as it stopped with a jerk, while they had kept on running. But they hadn't been able to run far. One of their number was badly hurt, and a drag on the others, in place of the dead horse which had broken loose completely.

Grabbing up the sack of gold, Johnny slung it over his shoulder and headed for the horses. A fresh fusillade of lead poured at him, the spiteful crack of the pistols punctuated by the heavier roar of the rifle.

But they were mad now and in a hurry, shooting wild. Johnny reached the horses. He slung the gold across the back of one, hastily tying it to the hames with a length of broken rein. Only one tug had to be unsnapped to allow the cayuse to plunge away, and Johnny knew that it would probably head back for town.

Part of the leaden fusillade was turned now toward the horse, but the bullets only served to speed it along. It plunged out of sight in the brush down below. Johnny had a second cayuse loose by then, and he swung to its back and let it run.

The road showed down below, and, just beyond that, the cool gleam of water where a creek ran, and the darker recesses of a big pool. Hope was rising in Johnny as they

reached the road, but it fell abruptly as the man with the rifle fired again. The cayuse leaped wildly, went down in a shuddering heap on the tiny meadow just below the road, and half a dozen feet back from the edge of the water.

STIMULATED to a frenzied point now, Johnny's reactions were fast. He had no time to jump from the horse, but he did manage to fling himself to one side as it hit, and so avoid being pinned beneath it.

But as he jumped up to run again, he sank back down with a moan tearing between his teeth. His ankle had twisted under him as he went down.

For the moment they had quit shooting, but the quartet was coming on down the hill, and losing no time about it. The cayuse with the gold was out of sight down the road, heading back to Hallmark, and it would reach the town and its stable ahead of them, despite anything they could do.

That much was on the credit side. Otherwise, Johnny saw, he had a dead horse, a bum leg, and one gun, which wouldn't shoot.

The deep pool, he saw, was a beaver pond. He might flop off in the water and try hiding in the depths. Reeds grew at the side of the pond. But in any case, they would soon find him. His only chance of keeping alive was to go on fighting—if he could find anything to fight with.

For the moment, the brush on the lower side of the slope hid him from the four horsemen. And right beside where he lay, a beaver had been at work not so long before. A collection of shiny sticks of various lengths and sizes, the bark neatly peeled off them, attested to that.

Three or four minutes later, having paused momentarily to survey the scene of the wreck, the four came into sight again. Crouching down behind his dead horse, Johnny waited. The lower road was just above him, a six-foot drop from it to the little meadow where he lay. Leaving their horses on the road, they started to come on down, looking for him.

He waited until the bandit with the rifle was barely ten feet away. It wouldn't do to take chances here. Johnny knew how to use the weapon he had fitted up, but this was a makeshift bow, made of one of the peeled sticks, with a leather rein from the dead horse for a bowstring, and another smaller stick for an arrow.

But at that range he couldn't miss. He rose up abruptly, saw the rifle's muzzle start to shift, fear spreading over the face of the gunman like the yellow film sliding across the eyes of a hawk. Johnny loosed his arrow.

The sharp stick went cleanly home in the man's thick neck. As he dropped, Johnny was on his feet, heedless of the racking pain in his leg. He jumped at the startled three who remained, swinging his bow as a club. It was six feet long, a stout, half-green one; formidable enough as a weapon at close range.

He felt the end of his whirling club strike hard beside a head, while a quick pop-shot from a pistol went wild. But the man was down as if pole-axed, and the other two were still coming at him—Mack Fulmer, the traitor, and the bogus drummer. *Two to go,* Johnny thought grimly.

He lashed out with his fist, and though his knuckles stung, he felt a glow of satisfaction as he caught Fulmer square in the mouth, driving him staggering back and down to his knees. But there was no chance to follow up his advantage.

Johnny felt the hot sear of lead scraping his cheek as he lunged, then he had grabbed the fellow, the whole power of his jump behind it. Turning and twisting, they went back and down—into the water together.

The shock of surprise numbed his antagonist, but not for long. He looked fat and ineffectual, but his looks were as deceptive as his pretense of a trade. He was fighting now, furiously and with grim purpose.

He grabbed Johnny's hair, wrenched his head around, and shoved it under. Johnny retaliated by finding a fat throat and clamping both hands deep. He clung relentlessly, while his lungs reached the bursting-point. Then the pressure relaxed as the drummer tore and wrenched at Johnny's gripping fingers, and Johnny shoved his head up into the air.

HE GULPED a sweet breath into his lungs, and something plopped in the pool beside his nose. The spiteful crack of Fulmer's pistol identified it, and Johnny ducked down again.

Working methodically now, Johnny

twisted, got the grip he wanted, and suddenly lifted, bringing his opponent's head up—and the over-eager Fulmer shot again, before he could see his mistake.

Johnny flung the inert body aside, dove as more lead cut the water around him. He had fooled Fulmer into making a bad mistake, but it left the odds still bad. Fulmer was the brains of this outfit, and now, with his companion dead, he could shoot at Johnny without hesitation.

He was trying now either to kill Johnny, or to force him to keep well under water until lack of air accomplished the same result.

It would be a hopeless game, he realized, if he had to play it out on Fulmer's terms. Johnny broke off a reed, stuck one end above the water and blew out the water in it with a gasp, then sucked fresh air down through it.

That was better. Now, head well below the surface, feet resting on the muddy bottom of the pond, he could stand there and still breathe. Maybe he could fool Fulmer into believing that he was dead.

But after a few seconds, Johnny saw that the hope was a vain one. Fulmer had figured out the reed airline, and was aiming to take steps. It was not pleasant, at best, down here on the bottom of the pond, but to lie there through the years— Johnny shivered—and started backward as something slogged through the water beside him.

That was a rock, about as big as a man could conveniently lift and heave.

As if in proof, another one bounced on Johnny's left shoulder and slid off. The cushioning effect of the water had saved him from the full force of it, which, out of the water, would have smashed him down. But it had hit plenty hard. And if Fulmer succeeded in dropping one on top of his head, it would at least stun him, so that he would quickly drown.

The pond was small enough, so that Fulmer could circle it and heave the stones to any point where he might try to take refuge. It was either get out, or die. Or, more probably, get out *and* die.

Something had knocked away his airline. Johnny flung himself toward the shore, a muddy beach opposite the one where he had been before.

Hope brightened his eyes. Circling the pond to try and get at him, Fulmer had laid down one of his pistols and grabbed up a stone instead. The gun was still there, close to the water. If he could reach it—

Johnny reached out stealthily with one hand, closed his fingers about the butt. Then, involuntarily his hand stabbed ahead with it, hard, as a bullet seemed to split the water beside his ear. That was a rifle bullet. To linger wouldn't be healthy, and he couldn't take the pistol under water with him. Johnny ducked back and down as the rifle crashed again.

Fulmer meant business. But apparently the last rifle shell had been used up. If he had thought of the big gun sooner, it could have been different. Now Fulmer turned back to the stones. Another rock sailed out, then another. A sudden hopeful suspicion in his mind, Johnny popped his head out.

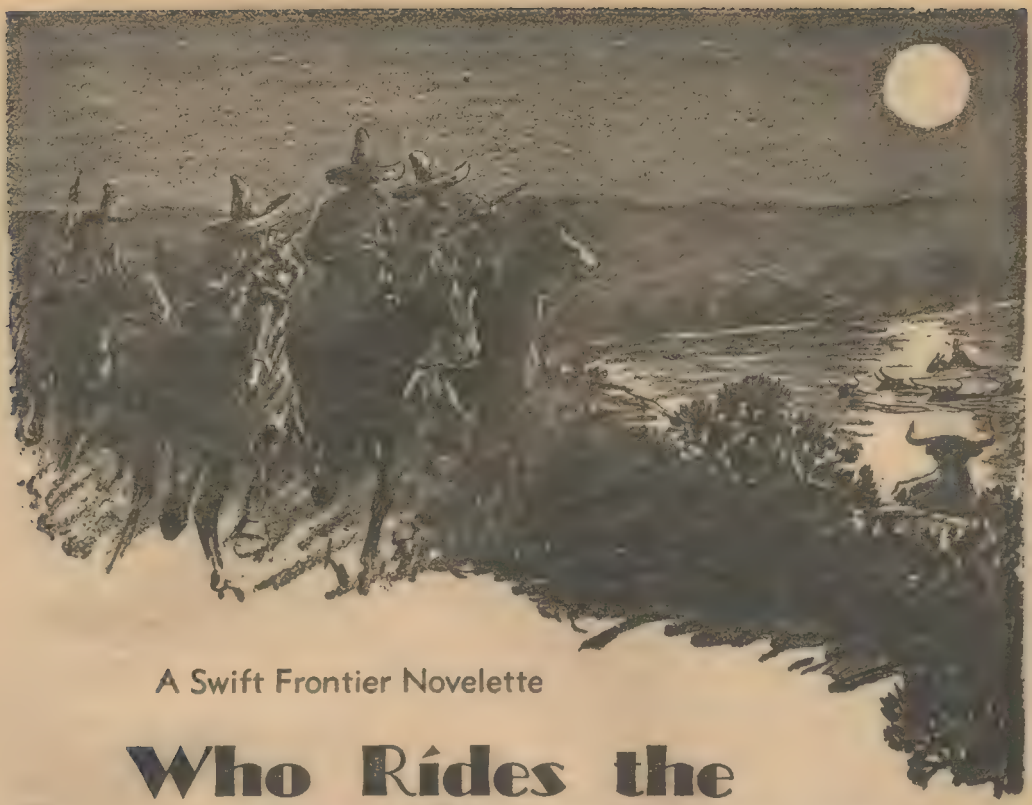
He saw Fulmer running toward the dropped pistol which he had been trying to get for himself. The pistols were single-shot, and evidently Fulmer had emptied all the guns with the exception of this one pistol—and had used up whatever extra ammunition had been brought along.

Deliberately, Johnny waited. He made it look as if he was starved for air. Fulmer snatched up the gun, and, as Johnny started to duck again, fired fast.

There was a rending, tearing explosion. Fulmer staggered back, his face a red smear, and toppled like a felled tree. Mildly surprised, Johnny crawled out.

"I knew I stuffed the barrel plumb full of half-dry, mighty hard mud, when I tried to grab the gun and then stabbed so wild with it, when you near scared the daylights out of me a bit ago," he ruminated. "And I knew the barrel'd likely explode if you could be fooled into firin' before you took a look—but I didn't expect it'd be so plumb fatal as all that."

He hobbled around the pond, to find that the man whom he had clubbed with the bow was showing signs of returning consciousness. But a lot of people were heading out from town now, coming into sight, and, with things under control and a bum leg, he was just as well pleased to see them. It had been a busy day.



A Swift Frontier Novelette

Who Rides the Border Death-Watch?

By JOHN H. LATHAM

Ramrodding the bloody Double Rafter range was just a warming-up chore for the tough, whiskey-drinking hand who called himself Sam Lee. . . . For his bosses had him earmarked to manage a boothill spread—just as soon as they could find the right name to put on his tombstone!

CHAPTER ONE

Border Ambush

THE MOON was right, a pale disc riding the flank of the brushy Pelon Mountains. The Border-jumpers were seasoned hands. They shoved the cattle down the narrow, rocky defile of Coyote Canyon in a long, bawling line. On the mesquite flats the swing men pressed in through the sifting dust, yelling and lashing stragglers with their doubled lariats, and a scaly-horned old bull with the Double Rafter brand burned in his shaggy side led the herd down into the wide, muddy Rio Grande.

It was the Guardia Rurale — they were caught in their own trap!

There were seven men in the rustler crew —heavily armed and well mounted, a tough, fighting outfit engaged in a tough business. Watching them from a thicket of manzanita on the south bank of the river, Sam Lee levered a shell into the barrel of his snub-nosed Winchester.

In the sallow moonlight the Double Rafter ramrod's whiskey-bloated face looked harsh and strained. There was an ugly glint in his bloodshot gray eyes. He took a flat Mexican flask from his chaps pocket and pulled the whittled stopper with his white teeth.

"We'll hold our fire till the point of the herd is across the river," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Wait until the drags are in the water and most of the crew with 'em, then cut loose! There's two-three hundred head of Double Rafter cattle in that herd, and it's up to us to turn 'em back!"

Jed Slaughter gave his strawboss a twisted grin. "I'm game," he murmured, his eyes hard and reckless under the brim of his battered old sombrero. "But hittin' that rotgut booze ain't going to help your aim none, Sam. What you trying to do, lay a gun-trap or get us both killed?"

Jed's tone was bantering, but for a fraction of a second the lopsided grin was wiped from his face and his dark eyes were

cold and deadly. "You been actin' mighty queer lately," he went on. "Ever since that fish-eyed lawyer, Ab Bishop, rode out from town for a pow-wow with you. Been drinkin' and broodin'. Riding the range alone at night. I got a hunch it had something to do with the Old Man's death. Or maybe—"

"Or maybe I'm just a green-eyed maverick who hates to see you beat his time with old Line Brady's daughter," Sam broke in harshly. "Handle your part of the shootin' and I'll handle mine, Jed. Quit riding me. If you don't like the way I run things, gimme my time and I'll pull stakes for Mexico City. Say the word and I'll make trail-dust."

Sam tried to match Jed Slaughter's crooked grin, but his heart was thudding against his ribs. He knew he had covered his tracks well. He was certain that no man in the Double Rafter outfit suspected the real reason he had come back to this wide-open Texas range. But a man could never bet on just how much lean, hell-raising, hard-drinking, poker-playing Jed Slaughter knew about anything.

Jed was a lot like his father, folks had told Sam Lee. His mother had died when he was just a shirt-tail kid and the Old Man had let him grow up like a rambunctious stud, bragging that he wouldn't have a son who couldn't drink and shoot and fight. There had been another son, older than Jed, but he had run away when his mother died. Folks said old Step-and-a-half Slaughter's drinking and hell-raising had driven his wife to an early grave, and the boy hated him for it.

Step-and-a-half Slaughter had turned into a dour, bitter man before his disappearance. He had left the Double Rafter tied up legally to keep Jed from gambling and drinking the outfit away. The estate, executed by a Terlingua Springs lawyer named Ab Bishop, had hired Sam Lee to serve as a sort of bit-check on twenty-two-year-old Jed Slaughter's unbridled wildness.

Big, tough, quiet-mannered and soft-spoken Sam Lee was making a mess of that job, he fully realized. But it was plain hell, trying to ride herd on the impetuous Jed and at the same time track down the rustlers who were stripping the Double Rafter.

"Cuidado!" he growled. "Here they come!"

The point rider came sloshing out of the water, little rivulets streaming from his brush-scarred *tapaderas* and saddle skirts. Behind him the wrinkle-browed old bull led the vanguard of the herd up the hoof-cut trail on the Mexican side of the river. Three of the men were sweating and cursing out in the middle of the sluggish stream, cutting back the critters that turned tail to the current. The other hands were hazing up the drags—dim, blurred shapes in the dust and murky darkness across the river.

Sam Lee stood up on his long saddle-bowed legs and brought the .30-30 stock to his shoulder. The Double Rafter ramrod's face was a muddy color under its coat of deep tan, and he was sweating as he lined his sights on the Border-jumper out in front of the herd.

He steadied the rifle, squeezed his finger around the trigger. The roar of the saddle gun was a signal for all hell to let loose there at the river crossing.

* * *

WILDLY YELLING horsemen suddenly broke from the brush on every side and converged upon them, and a salvo of shots roused thunderous echoes among the surrounding hills.

Sam's first thought was that Jed had ordered the Double Rafter crew to trail them, take a hand in the fight. Then he caught the dull gleam of crossed bandoleers, saw the dark faces under wide roll-brimmed sombreros, and knew—the Guardia Rurale had also set a gun-trap for the renegades!

Lances of flame stabbed the murky darkness as the rustlers fired back. Sudden death hailed in the smoke-shrouded night and the harsh whir of bullets was like droning chords ripping through the roar and confusion. Sam and Jed Slaughter were caught in the crossfire, shot at by the renegades and Rurales alike.

Sam saw the point man drop from the saddle like a poled beef, his hat plucked away and flung into the chaparral by the bullet that killed him. Back of him the old bull whirled and crashed into the vanguard of the herd, scattering it in wild confusion.

Cattle churned in the stream, frightened and bewildered. A rider, caught in the ruck of them as they circled back, vanished under the water with his horse. Another rus-

tler was shot from the saddle and floated away like a slowly rolling log.

Sam saw a string of riders splash into the river below them, evidently bent on cutting off escape for the rest of the outlaw band. Sheer surprise kept him rooted to the spot while a clock might have ticked off ten seconds, and in that time he saw another renegade drop and a second spur away, reeling in the saddle.

Behind him Sam heard Jed's quick, startled outcry, but his every faculty was centered on this sudden, unexpected drama of death that had engulfed them.

"Duck, you damn' fool!" Jed shouted urgently. "They're shooting at us too!"

Sam broke free, then, of the stunned inertia that had gripped him. Whirling, the rifle held in readiness, he saw a knot of horsemen swerve to make a run at them. He saw the dull gleam of silver on the leader's spangled *charro* jacket. He touched his cheek with the .30-30 stock and laid three shots into their line as fast as he could lever them into the firing chamber, breaking the back of the charge. Then he fell back, cursing, and emptied the saddle gun at the scattering riders.

"Rattle your hocks!" he barked at Jed. "We can't stand 'em off. Lose yourself in the brush!"

Guns thundered around them in the night, and into the intermittent pauses fell the wild bawling of cattle and the cracking of horns as the herd turned tail and went in a mad scramble for the Texas side of the river. Sam had a glimpse of Jed, hunkered down and running through the brush off to the left. Somewhere a man was down and cursing loudly in a shrill, high-pitched voice.

A rider came crashing toward him through the buckbrush. Sam spun around and stabbed down with his hand, ripping his sixgun up out of his holster and swinging it to bear on the dim target. Just as he was about to fire, the man leaped off his horse, flung something into the brush and then scuttled away on foot.

Sam made a run at the horse. The animal shied away. Then the reins snarled in a clump of greasewood and the horse reared back, fighting in wild terror.

The gunfire died away as abruptly as it had begun. Sam could hear riders threshing through the brush, knew the Rurales were spread out all around him. With that urgent thought, he turned from the horse and went at a crouching run, through the undergrowth that was not high enough to hide an upright man.

A hoarse cry sounded behind him, and Sam knew that he had been spotted. He whirled, cursing, trying to get a shot at the elusive targets back there in the brush. Then a bullet struck him a stunning blow in the leg, straightened it out behind him as if jerked by a rope.

Sam went down on his face, blinded by dirt and pain. The sixgun was torn from his grasp, and eluded his groping hand. Horsemen converged upon him through the thick, tangled chaparral. Lifting his head, Sam wiped the dirt from his face with a bloody hand and tried to grin.

The fight was over.

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2. Accept purchases unwrapped whenever possible.

3. Don't *waste* paper!

. . . To Win the War in '44!

THE GUARDIA RURALE, Mexico's hard-riding, straight-shooting rural police, dispensed quick, grim justice to men caught running stolen stock across the Border. Four of the renegades had been killed in the ambush fight at the crossing; only one had escaped. Two—plus Sam Lee—had been captured. One of the outlaws had been shot through the chest and was coughing up blood. He sagged against the wall during the hearing, too sick and weak to care what sentence was meted out.

Captain Huerta was a squat, cold-eyed Mexican with prematurely gray hair and thick lips that never quite met over his protruding, tobacco-stained teeth. He wore a dirty, nondescript army uniform and had a sword and silver-mounted six-shooter buckled around his hips. A guttering candle on the table before him threw his face in bold relief and kept the rest of the little *cuarto* in semi-darkness.

"You have been caught in the act of running stolen cattle from Texas into Mexico," he said, his beady eyes glittering. "Wet cattle, you gringo cowpunchers call them. Stock driven across the Rio Grande without benefit of customs inspection or duty payment. That is a violation of the laws of Mexico, and the penalty is death!"

Captain Huerta spoke in clipped, precise Spanish. Sam Lee had been raised on the Texas Border and could speak and understand it like a native. Cold sweat beaded his brow as he stood there in the murky room with its smell of sweat and tobacco, staring at the commandant through the thick layers of smoke hanging in the dead air.

"It is about two hours until sunrise," Huerta added grimly. "At that time you will be stood against a 'dobe wall and shot!"

Sam Lee still had a .30-30 slug in his right leg. On the ride to Peñal he had ripped his undershirt into narrow strips and made a crude bandage for the wound, using a mesquite stick to twist it tight and stop the bleeding. He hobbled closer to the commandant's table now, gritting his teeth against the pain in his leg.

"Mi capitan," he began, speaking in the man's own tongue. "I am no rustler. My name is Sam Lee, and I'm ramrod of the Double Rafter outfit. I was trailing those cattle when your men—"

"That's all!" Huerta snapped, waving his hand at the guard. "Take the prisoners away."

"But *mi capitan,"* Sam protested. "I'm not—"

A Rurale guard stepped in and slapped Sam Lee across the mouth with his open hand. Sam's head snapped back. He spat blood and grinned crookedly at the two outlaws who had been brought in with him, his bloodshot steel-gray eyes full of smoulder-ing rage.

"These stinkin' *pelados,"* he said deliberately, "are the kind of mangy coyotes just tough enough to kick a man around when they got him helpless at the point of a gun!"

The outlaw leader was a burly, black-eyed, thin-lipped man with a lean face as boldly hewn as an eroded cliff. He wore his brush-and thorn-scarred *chapaderras,* ragged leather jacket, and the service-worn shell belt and holster of a brush-popping Texas cowhand. He gave Sam a slow, burning look.

"For a belly-crawlin' sidewinder," he drawled, "you got a lot of guts. Simmer down, son. Tuck in your shirt-tail. Going off half-cocked now ain't going to help our case any. Hog-tie that bullheaded temper and we'll have a war council as soon as these chili-eatin' *soldados* lock us up for the night."

Sam shrugged. Fighting was useless, he knew. Fishing the makings out of his chaps pocket, he calmly began building a quirly. Inside he was seething, full of sullen anger and wild desperation. The big ramrod had liked his job with the Double Rafter outfit, but right now it looked as if he was going to draw a 'dobe wall and a firing squad as wages.

"You call the cards," he said flatly. "I'll play my hand the way I see fit."

CHAPTER TWO

Escape—To Death!

THE PRISONERS were herded into a high-walled adobe corral that had recently held cattle. They built a small fire in the middle of the enclosure out of dried cow-chips. Sam folded his brush-jacket under the wounded outlaw's head and made the man as comfortable as he

could. Each indrawn breath rattled in the rustler's throat, and his face took on a dirty grayish pallor under the stubble of rusty whiskers.

"Looks like I'm playing an ace in the hole agin them Rurales, Blackie," he managed, grinning weakly at the big Border-jumper standing beside Sam. "Old Charlie is gonna cash in his chips before sun-up and cheat that pepper-belly firing squad, sure as shootin'!"

Sam Lee and the big outlaw squatted down by the fire, smoking and talking in low tones, waiting for what might be their last sunrise. The cowman's leg was swelling, throbbing with a dull pain all the way down to his toes. Now and then a Rurale guard looked at them through the barred gate.

"So you and Ab Bishop were trying to butcher a Tita Galina beef?" Blackie murmured, with a sardonic laugh. "I always thought a man could strip off that law rep's fancy pants and find his tailbone ended in rattlesnake buttons! Well, Mr. Ramrod, your gun-trap turned around and bit hell out of you."

"It looks that way," Sam Lee admitted. "But Jed Slaughter is nobody's fool, even though he is a young hellion a-runnin' loose like a bronco steer. He went prowlin' tonight, maybe riding over to old Line Brady's to see his daughter. Anyway, he cut your sign right after you drove that herd out of Cotulla pasture."

The outlaw's opaque black eyes slitted. "I don't mind losing the herd," he said slowly, "but I had a morral stuffed full of money and slung from my saddlehorn. I shucked it when the Rurales jumped us, dropped it in a clump of greasewood. The men who owned a share in that dinero are mostly dead." He hooked a thumb at the still shape lying back in the shadows.

"There's enough gold in that morral for a good South American stake," he said.

Sam suddenly remembered the burly man who had tossed something heavy into the brush during the fight. And he knew where that clump of greasewood was!

"There is also," Sam reminded him grimly, "a lard-gutted Rurale *capitan* who's dead set on standin' us agin that 'dobe wall yonder and shooting us at sunrise!"

"It's not impossible to escape from these Mexican *cartels,*" Blackie answered, lowering his voice and slanting his hard eyes at the guard. "I've known two-three fellows that lit a shuck out of places harder to crack than this."

Sam Lee let his gaze wander around the makeshift prison, taking in the double guard posted at the gate and the thick corral walls that stood twice as high as a man's head. He knew from a cursory examination that the west wall was gouged and pitted by bullets on a level with a man's heart, and the hard-packed earth below bore mute, dark stains.

Sam knew that a lot of badmen, and a lot of reckless, headstrong cowpunchers, had come down the outlaw trail and wound up here, looking at their last sunrise with a 'dobe wall at their backs. But news of such events was seldom carried across the Rio. Likely Jed Slaughter would never hear what had happened to his big night-riding ramrod.

"We can try it," Sam conceded. "Neither of us got a damn thing to lose. I'd as soon be shot down trying to wrestle a rifle from one of those guards as wait for a hunk of lead at sunrise with a formal military ceremony."

"Then I'm bustin' you out of here!" The big Border-jumper's voice rasped like a rusty saw. "It ain't because I want to, but because I'm afraid you might squall for the guards if I left you behind. Agin, I've got a score to settle with you later, Mr. Bushwhacking Cow-boss!"

Sam Lee and the big Border-jumper called Blackie went over the prison wall half an hour later. They knew that the darkest part of the night usualy comes just before dawn. And they hoped, as Blackie put it, that one of the bare-footed Rurale guards would get a chill in his guts and go hunting a fire.

Blackie had been in Mexican *cartels* before. He was wearing a trick belt made of tightly-woven leather and held together by a rawhide thong. He untwisted the string, and the belt made a thin, strong rawhide rope about twelve feet long.

* * *

BLACKIE FLIPPED the short rope over a corner post that projected a few inches above the 'dobe wall of the corral. By now Sam's leg was swollen

all the way to his hip, and the pain of it had turned his face a sickly grayish color, beaded his palms with cold sweat. Blackie hoisted him up and the puncher managed to drag himself onto the three-foot-wide wall.

Blackie discarded his big roweled silver-mounted Mexican spurs that jingled like little metal bells when he moved, and came up the rope hand over hand. Then he pulled up the rope and dropped it on the outside of the wall. When they were down, the outlaw flipped the rope loose and coiled it over his shoulder.

"I'm saving it for a good-luck piece," he grinned. "Never can tell when a rope like this will come in handy."

Peñal was about a mile from the river, some ten miles below the crossing where the Rurales had jumped them. Back of them rose the towering Tita Galina Mountains. The pueblo, a drab cluster of adobe buildings amid scattering cottonwood trees, was set in the middle of a flat, brushy plain that slid down to the river. In the east a false dawn rimmed the jagged hills with light, bringing to Sam the desperate urgency of their situation.

In another half-hour Captain Huerta and his ragged *soldados* would march into the corral to carry out the sentence of last night's military court. They would find only a dead outlaw. But if Sam and the renegade leader failed to reach the Rio Grande before pursuit started, they were still 'dobe wall bait.

Blackie plunged into the thick, thorny *matorral*, with Sam Lee hobbling along behind him, dragging his crippled leg. Catclaw and *huijilla* tore at Sam's face and hands, leaving bloody furrows. Cold sweat ran from the big ramrod's face in rivulets, and every step sent pain stabbing through his whole body from his wounded leg. Several times he fell, but each time he gritted his teeth against the nausea that threatened to engulf him and climbed doggedly to his feet, goaded along by the outlaw's fervent cursing.

The sun came up just before they reached the river. Sam was staggering like a drunken man, a scared, dazed look in his bloodshot eyes. The first sounds of pursuit came to them in the early morning stillness: shouts, then the cracking of brush as horsemen scattered out through the chaparral, hunting sign.

"Run, you damn' fool!" Blackie panted, his deep-set eyes glittering with rage and frustration. "Those *pelados* will pick up our trail any minute. *Andale!*"

Sam Lee half ran, half fell down the steep incline to the river. He plunged into the warm, muddy water behind the outlaw, his breath coming in hollow, burning gasps. Here the river was wide and shallow, and a mud bar, snagged with mesquite stumps and debris, snaked like a black finger half across the stream. Beyond that was deeper, swifter water.

The two men floundered along the mud bar, spurred on by increasing sounds of pursuit. Just short of the main current Blackie broke a short, water-soaked limb from one of the stumps and whirled on Sam Lee with savage fury.

"Now, you dirty, double-dealin' *cabron!*" he snarled, his red-rimmed eyes glaring insanely. "No man can cross Blackie Leonard and live!"

Sam Lee had known this was coming. He tried to dodge, tried to sag at the knees and take the shock out of the vicious blow Blackie swung at his head. But his pain-swollen muscles refused to respond to his bidding. He stood paralyzed, seeing the outlaw through a reddish haze, and the rock-hard mesquite club caught him full over the head, knocked him to his knees.

Stunned, Sam flung himself headlong at Blackie and grabbed the outlaw's brush-jacket pocket. Then his brain seemed to explode in little pinwheels of light, and he sagged face-down in the shallow water, his tightening grip ripping the pocket from the outlaw's jacket.

Blackness washed over him, darker than any night Sam Lee had ever known. . . .

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

THE HOT, blinding glare of the Texas sun brought Sam Lee slowly back to life. He moved a little, moaned in anguish as pain stabbed through his battered body. His head felt as if it had been split wide open with a double-bitted axe. His right leg was a dead weight, numb from the waist down, and he had a corral taste in his mouth.

Sam was sprawled face-down on the mud bar, one leg dragging in the water. He wondered dully how he had gotten there.

Then something clamped around his chest, crushing the wind out of his lungs and stretching his aching muscles until he cried out in pain. His voice, hoarse as the croak of a buzzard, sounded startling even to his own ears.

The pressure was slacked off. Sam realized that it had been made by a taut catch-rope; that somebody was snaking him out of the river. He lifted a shaking hand to wipe the blood and grime from his eyes and looked up.

"Take 'er easy, cowboy," a tense voice admonished.

Donna Brady straddled a big grulla horse on the river-bank, the riata snubbed to her rope-marked saddlehorn. Under the brim of a battered old sweat-stained sombrero her face was as white as if she'd seen a ghost. She was wearing a man's dusty khakis, with bullhide chaps and a leather brush jacket, and the butt of a saddle gun stuck from a service-worn scabbard under her right leg. She swung down.

"You look like a carcass left by the Apaches," she told the Double Rafter ramrod. "Or maybe something the coyotes had been chewing on. What's happened to you, Sam?"

Sam's grin was lopsided and painful. "I had a run-in with the devil," he gritted. "He hooked me with his horn when I wasn't looking. Think you can lug me into a sawbones, Donna?"

"You can't go near a town on this side of the Border," Donna Brady said flatly. "Jed Slaughter and Ab Bishop had the sheriff get out a warrant for your arrest on a rustlin' charge. They claim it was you that tipped the Tita Galina gang off about the herd in Cotulla pasture. There's even talk that you had a hand in old Step-and-a-half Slaughter's death."

"Then turn me in," Sam rasped. "Collect the bounty that Jed Slaughter is bound to put on my head."

"I can't take you to a doctor, Sam," Donna answered evenly. "But I'm a fair medico in my own right. I've patched up more than one case of lead poisonin' at Dad's ranch."

Donna took a thin-bladed Mexican *cuchillo* from her saddlebags. While Sam watched in open-mouthed amazement, the girl built a small brush-fire and heated the point of the knife. Then she cut away his pants leg and looked at the wound.

"The bullet is lodged right here," she said, tapping a bluish welt on the back of Sam's leg. "This is going to hurt like hell. Get something between your teeth and hang on, cowboy!"

Sam still had the leather pocket of Blackie's brush jacket clutched in his hand. There was also a piece of brown wrapping-paper. Sam stuffed the paper in his pocket. He folded the strip of torn leather and gripped it in his teeth.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE 15c

"If it hurts too much," she said, "yell! I won't mind."

Donna Brady was one of the prettiest girls in the brush country. Her pioneer dad had sent her to a finishing school in San Antonio, given her a good education and raised her to be a lady, but the girl could outride and outshoot most of the punchers who rode for Line Brady's Hat outfit.

When she had finished, and bandaged the bleeding wound with strips torn from her shirt-tail, the big ramrod's face had turned a sickly yellowish color and he had bitten half through the folded leather in his mouth. With a trembling hand he pulled the nearly-empty whiskey bottle out of his chaps pocket and took a long swig. Then he heaved the bottle in the river.

"Now all I got to do is dodge the law until this leg heals," he said gruffly.

"You can hole up at the Hot Wells line camp on the Hat range for a few days," Donna told him. "It's over in the Kornudas Mountain country. That's winter range and nobody rides it at this time of the year. We keep an old broken-down cowpuncher named Dad McNew over there to look after the few cattle that drift down off the Pelons.

"The hot wells are two-three hundred feet back in a cave in the mountain. Cattle and antelope go back in the cave after water. Dad McNew's dugout is right at the mouth of the cave. The whole country around Kornudas Mountain is flat, and you can see a rider coming ten miles away. You can hide in the cave if somebody approaches, and if you tell Dad I sent you, he'll treat you right."

Donna grinned and shook hands with Sam Lee. "Take my horse," she ordered. "Ride him to the Hot Wells line camp, then tie the reins to the saddle horn and he'll come home. I know some Mexicans that live about a mile down the river. I'll tell them my horse boogered and run away from me, left me on foot. They'll see that I get home."

Sam Lee held the girl's hand longer than was necessary, and the fire in his eyes wasn't due entirely to fever.

"You'll sure do to ride the river with, Donna," he said huskily. "I won't forget this. And maybe when the cards are all down you won't think of me as a two-bit badman."

"There are times," said Donna Brady, "when you talk like a *muy bueno hombre*, Sam Lee. *Adios!*"

Sam let the stirrups out, then he mounted the chunky, powerful grulla that Donna Brady had given him and lifted the horse to a lope along the river trail. He rode due west, gripping the saddle horn and fighting the pain of his wounded leg. Once he stopped the grulla, leaned from the saddle and let the nausea have its way with him, and when he had got some of the muddy Rio Grande water out of his system, he felt better.

Loping along, Sam tried to figure out just what course of action Blackie Leonard would take. If he had been in Blackie's boots, Sam thought, he would head straight north until he reached the foothills of the Pelons. There the outlaw might steal a horse from one of the shoestring Mexican outfits. Of one thing Sam was certain. Blackie wouldn't let any grass grow under his feet before circling back after the morral full of gold he had dropped during the fight with the Rurales.

"That spur-jinglin' Border-hopper is due a big surprise," Sam said aloud, "when he gets back to the *rio* crossing and finds I've beaten him to that gold!"

* * *

SAM NEVER did remember much about his ride to the Hot Wells line camp, forty miles out from the mouth of Mariscal Canyon. He was gaunt and fever-ridden when he reached it, alternately sweating from the effects of a burning heat and then shaking in the grip of an ague. He had lashed himself in the saddle with Donna's catch-rope to keep from falling off the horse and dying out there in the desert.

He had a hazy recollection of a lean, hard-bitten oldster with a pepper-shot gray beard and a rheumatic limp in one of his saddle-bowed legs, pulling him off the grulla and dragging him into the dugout. Then things blurred, ran together, and when Sam opened his eyes again he was lying in a cold, dank place with the musty smell of a cave.

Sam was stretched out on a dirty soogan. A poultice made of black river mud was wrapped around his wounded leg to draw the soreness out, and somebody had cleaned and bandaged the gash in his head where Blackie Leonard had laid his scalp open.

Looking around in the dim light that

seeped through from somewhere behind him, Sam saw that he was in a huge cave with seamed and split porphyry walls that ran up to nothingness in black shadow. Nearby was a tarp-covered bedroll, a Winchester with a splintered stock held together by baling wire, and some smoke-blackened cooking utensils. It was obvious that somebody had been using this cave for a long time.

Sam fished the makings out of his pocket and built a smoke, and a rueful grin twisted his bearded lips when he observed the trembling weakness of his big work-toughened hands. He was scratching a match on the stock of the .30-30 when he heard the dull clank of spurs behind him. Then the lank oldster came into view, carrying an armload of mesquite wood.

"So you've come out of it," the old man growled, dumping the wood near the ashes of a dead fire. "I told Donna you couldn't kill a sidewinder by shooting off its rattles and stompin' its head. Some men are just too ornery to die, and I reckon you're one of 'em, Sam Lee!"

Sam was thankful for the murky light that hid the sudden grayish pallor of his face. He cupped the flame of the match in his hands, slitting his eyes to shield the naked emotion in them, and when he flipped the match away and took a deep draw on the quirly, his face was a set mask that revealed none of the excitement thudding inside him.

"I reckon that goes double, Step-and-a-half," he drawled. "Looks like your corpse is still a-buckin' and a-kickin'!"

Old Step-and-a-half Slaughter grunted as if he'd been kicked in the belly. Then he stared near-sightedly at Sam, and a puzzled look, as of half-recognition, crossed his weatherbeaten features. He sighed, his eyes dulling once more, and shook his head.

"So you recognized me, eh?" he said, sucking in a deep breath. "Well, I 'lowed to Donna this beard wouldn't fool nobody that ever knew me before. You can't change a horse much by letting his mane grow. But how in the hell did you come to know me? Ab Bishop hired you after I dropped out of sight."

"I used to live in this country years back," Sam Lee answered slowly, "when I was just a shirt-tail kid. And nobody could miss that walk of yours."

Sam could have told the old man a lot more, but he didn't. The sign wasn't right yet. But he still couldn't understand why old Step-and-a-half had dropped out of sight, hid out here at this Hot Wells line camp while his Double Rafter outfit was rustled blind.

"Ab Bishop," Slaughter said abruptly, "is either a mule-headed fool or a crooked coyote. I had him hog-tie the Double Rafter with legal strings so Jed couldn't drink and gamble the spread away. Then Bishop hired a Border-jumping tough like you to ramrod the spread, and you let enough of Jed's beef get run across the Rio to put the outfit in the red for the next ten years. If you wasn't on a sick-bed I'd give you a gun and then cut you down like a polecat, Sam Lee!"

Sam grinned twistedly, his steel-gray eyes bloodshot and ugly. "It's your fault for ridin' off and leaving a young hellion like Jed in charge of your ranch," he retorted. "Jed is just doing his damnedest to fill your boots. You raised him that way."

* * *

THE RANCHER hunkered down by Sam's bedroll, his faded old eyes reflecting misery and anger and despair. He suddenly looked old beyond his years, a stove-up, embittered man with the burden of living heavy on his stooped shoulders.

"I know it," he admitted. "That's why I dropped out of sight, let my horse drift back to the ranch with the blood of a butchered beef smeared on the saddle. Me and Donna figured a shock like that would put Jed on his own two feet, that the responsibility of running the ranch would wean him from his wild ways. Maybe we figured wrong. I been wrong about a lot of things in my life."

Sam's eyes were hard, unrelenting. "You and Jed are both stubborn, headstrong fools," he rasped. "Both of you too ornery and proud to get along. Jed could have taken holt of that ranch years ago, but you were scared he'd blow the works on wine, women and song.

"Now he's doing his damnedest, but the cards are all stacked agin him. Ab Bishop has been selling the boy out short, conniving with Border thieves to rustle the range clean. And all this time you been cached

out here, 'stead of in there pitchin' to help your son. You're either a danged old fool or a good imitation, Slaughter!"

"I had a morral full of gold slung from my saddlehorn when I rode in here," Sam went on. "I took it off an outlaw named Blackie Leonard who ramrods those Tita Galina renegades that Ab Bishop has been dealing with. It should just about cover the loss the Double Rafter has taken in stolen cattle. And I have a note that Blackie wrote Bishop and didn't get a chance to send him. It's proof enough even for a thick-skulled old maverick like you that the two are in cahoots."

Sam took the folded paper that he had torn away with the outlaw's brush-jacket pocket and handed it to the rancher. The old man squinted at it, then handed it back to Sam.

"You'll have to read it," he said. "My eyes ain't what they used to be, and it's kind of dark in here."

Sam smoothed the piece of brown wrapping paper on his leg. The message had been written with a soft-nosed cartridge.

"Lawyer," he read. "Somebody followed that Mexican kid you sent down nearly into camp. One of the boys took a shot at him, but he got away. Better play your cards close for a while."

"Donna Brady rode in here early this morning," Slaughter said flatly. "She—"

"Told you I'd been captured by the Rurales, managed to escape," Sam broke in harshly, "and that she roped me out of the water and saved my life. You think maybe that's the reason I'm squealin'. Well, I don't give a damn what you think! I aimed to get a line on the Double Rafter man dealin' with the outlaws. I didn't know but what it was Jed himself, since the ranch is tied up in legal strings and he can't get money out of it to speak of. It wasn't Jed. It was Ab Bishop, that Terlingua Springs lawyer!"

Slaughter's gaze was dour, forbidding. "Jed is wild," he admitted. "But he's honest as the day is long. I can't figure you out, though. You sound to me like a slinking, two-bit range detective with a nickel-plated badge pinned to your undershirt. But I think you're telling the truth, Sam Lee!"

"You ain't foolin' me none," Sam said shortly. "You knew somebody was sellin' the Double Rafter short even before you disappeared. You thought it was Jed. You're so tickled it ain't that you're ready to turn handsprings, even with a game leg!"

Slaughter picked up his .30-30 and crammed his pockets full of shells. He took a pair of bone-handled six-shooters slung on a gunbelt out of his bedroll and buckled them on, tilting the polished butts until the hang was right. Then he swung his saddle gear over his shoulder and started for the cave entrance, walking with that peculiar gait that had given him the name of Step-and-a-half.

"I'm riding," he said shortly. "I been holed up here too long. There's plenty of grub and you won't starve." He paused, turned his black look on Sam Lee. "You'll be able to ride in a few more days. Take my advice and drift yonderly!"

CHAPTER THREE

Death to the Slaughters!

WHEN SAM LEE hobbled out into the sunlight three days later, he looked and felt like a mere shadow of the big cow boss who had laid a gun-trap for rustlers with Jed Slaughter at the *rio* crossing. His tanned cheeks were pale and hollow, and his red-rimmed gray eyes were sunken and yellowish. He looked like a man of forty-three instead of thirty-three, and the exertion of walking had drained the strength from his thin body and left his face beaded with cold sweat.

But there was a crooked, triumphant grin on Sam's face, for he had found that he *could* walk again, and the knowledge burned in him like the bite of strong whiskey. "In two-three days," he reflected, "I'll be able to ride agin. No special place to go. Reckon I'll just take old Step-and-a-half's advice and drift yonderly."

Watching a dust devil zig-zag across the plain, Sam's eyes were seeing other things. Just the same, it was nice to be back on the home range again, he was thinking, even when folks like old Step-and-a-half treated him like he had the blackleg!

Sam found a spare six-shooter in the dugout. He dropped it in his empty holster, making a few slow draws to ascertain that it fitted the leather loosely. Then he took

a couple of shots at a tin can to acquaint himself with the gun's whims. A gun was like a woman, he knew, and more than one man had lost his life because he had neglected to make more than a cursory acquaintance with his weapon.

There was a horse pasture in a shallow swale below the entrance to the cave, where the seep from the hot wells collected in brackish pools and stubby buffalo grass grew in scattered clumps. Two or three cow-ponies wearing Line Brady's Hat brand grazed in the trap, and Sam found a service-worn saddle and bridle in a lean-to stable alongside the dugout. He had all the equipment a drifting cowhand needed, but somehow he hated to leave this range.

Sam Lee had been on his own since he was ten years old, and in the lean years in between he had run the gauntlet from remuda wrangler to cow boss on one of the biggest spreads in Texas. He had drifted through a dozen ranges, ridden on both sides of the law, and his reputation had always been that of a hard, tough hand headed for eventual outlawry. Somehow the wild ways caught hold of a man and rushed him along, once he got started.

Looking ahead, Sam could see only dreary owlhoot years and the loneliness of dim trails and one-man campfires. He clenched his big hands and pressed them hard against his temples, and there was a glazed sort of look in his gray eyes. Not so long ago he had visualized something far different—and infinitely better! For then Sam had known the warmth of Donna Brady's smile, had felt a savage, possessive thrill when near her. Then he had swung a wider loop than Jed Slaughter, and had been marked on the range as the lucky maverick who was going to marry old Line Brady's pretty daughter.

All of that was changed now, of course. Sam was an outlaw with a price on his head. He could lay that blame, without rancor, to Jed Slaughter. A fellow couldn't help liking Jed, Sam told himself angrily, for all of his wild ways and the fact that he had won out with Donna. Jed was square and honest, and he had gone to the law only after securing definite proof that his cow boss was leagued with the Tita Galina gang.

"I stacked the deck agin me," Sam said aloud. "Reckon I ain't got much kick coming!"

The next night Sam was stronger, and he picked up his bedroll and carried it to a thicket of manzanite a few hundred feet from the mouth of the cave. He had a strange, deep-rooted fear of inclosed places, of mines and dark holes in the earth. It made him feel better to sleep out in the warm night under the stars, and it gave him the secure knowledge that nobody could trap him in the cave.

Late that night he wakened to the stamp of hoofs and the creak of saddle leather, as a horseman rode to the mouth of the cave and dismounted. Sam, fully clad except for his boots, rolled out of his tarp-covered bed with a cocked six-shooter in his hand. He crouched back in the shadows, waiting, and in a moment he heard a woman's urgent voice.

"Sam, it's Donna! Where are you?"

"Here, Donna," Sam called. He eased the sixgun back in its scabbard and commenced struggling with his boots. His heart was thudding violently against his ribs.

"You little fool," he said gruffly, when the girl came up leading her heaving mount. "Don't ever ride up on a hunted man like that again. You might get shot!"

* * *

THE WAN moonlight marked the agitation in Donna's eyes. She said tensely, "Sam, old Step-and-a-half Slaughter has been shot!"

"Uh?"

Donna said hurriedly, almost hysterically, "It all happened tonight, right after supper. Jed and his father were in the ranch house, quarreling. Ab Bishop and Anthony were on the porch. They heard shooting, and rushed in to find old Step-and-a-half lying unconscious on the floor. He'd been shot twice in the chest. Jed was standing over him with a smoking sixgun in his hand. He was drunk and fighting mad, and Anthony had to knock him out to take the gun away from him."

"Gawdamighty!" Sam gasped, horrified. "Jed Slaughter don't hate his dad! Why would he kill him?"

There was something strange about Donna's story, but he was too shocked and confused to grasp it.

The girl shuddered. "I don't know,

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Sam," she half sobbed. "So many crazy things have been happening at the Double Rafter. First Jed's missing brother turns up after all these years, then his father is shot and Jed thrown in jail. Step-and-a-half is badly hurt and hasn't regained consciousness. They'll hang Jed, sure, if old Step-and-a-half dies. I just don't know which way to turn, or what to believe!"

It seemed to Sam Lee, staring at the girl in open-mouthed amazement, that the more he learned about this grim business, the less he actually knew.

"Jed—Jed's brother?" he managed, his voice somewhat thick. "When did he show up? Where did he come from?"

"He contacted Ab Bishop in Terlingua Springs about three days ago," Donna told him. "It seems he read about Step-and-a-half's death—or rather his disappearance—in an Eastern paper, and came out West to claim his part of the estate."

"And if Jed's hung for his father's murder," Sam said, letting out a long, shuddering breath, "this new heir will take over the whole ranch as the sole remaining Slaughter!"

"That's true," Donna admitted. "But Ab Bishop is investigating this man's story. He says if it's a fake, he'll—"

"He'll do nothing!" Sam Lee finished for her grimly. "Ab Bishop is probably in cahoots with this gent, in on the steal. What does this hombre look like, Donna?"

"He's tall," said Donna. "And big—even bigger than you are, Sam. He has a bold face and snapping black eyes that bore right through you. He's dark, like Jed, but there's a different kind of wildness about him."

"Blackie!" Sam growled, smashing his fist savagely against the palm of his hand. "Blackie Leonard! That big Border-jumpin' renegade is plannin' the biggest steal ever pulled in the state of Texas, Donna. He and Ab Bishop, workin' partners!"

Bishop was a lawyer and had access to the county records in Terlingua Springs, Sam knew. He had probably learned from range gossip that old Step-and-a-half Slaughter had another son, and traced it down in the records. The boy had been gone over twenty years. Few people could identify him after that lapse of time, and it would be fairly easy to pass Blackie

Leonard, who was dark like the Slaughters, off as the missing heir.

"Jed Slaughter didn't shoot his father," Sam declared heavily. "This is something cooked up by Bishop and Blackie Leonard, and I sure as hell aim to clear Jed!"

Remorse and bitterness rose to gall Sam Lee as he rode back with Donna Brady. He had made a mess of things, he thought morosely. If old Step-and-a-half Slaughter died, it would be on Sam's conscience the rest of his life. He had brought this ugly business to a head, and he should have carried it on through instead of letting the old rancher take his place at the showdown.

There had been reasons for Sam's actions, but in this moment of self-condemnation he cast them aside.

"I'm too thick between the horns to rope a tame heifer," he said furiously, glaring into the night. "I come down here to rake in my own personal jackpot, and wind up by maybe gettin' old Step-and-a-half killed and steerin' Jed into a hangnoose!"

* * *

THEY CHANGED horses at the Hat headquarters and again at the Double Rafter. In the heat of the following afternoon they rode two sweating cowponies into the outskirts of Terlingua Springs and drew rein in front of a neat, whitewashed 'dobe shack set back in the mottled shade of rustling cottonwood trees.

A gaunt, unshaven old man wearing a sun-faded blue serge coat, with a red silk serape drawn over his stooped shoulders, opened the door when Sam knocked. His eyes went bleak when he recognized the two visitors.

"What are you doing here with this outlaw, Donna?" he snapped. "If he's forcin' you—"

"We come by to see how old Step-and-a-half is getting along," Sam broke in quietly. "Tell us, Doc, what are his chances?"

"We've got to know, Dr. Cole," Donna added, placing her hand on the oldster's arm. "Has he come out of it long enough to talk yet?"

Cole was silent for a moment, studying them both with his puckered old eyes. "Slaughter will live—maybe!" he said finally. "He'll live if he don't worry himself

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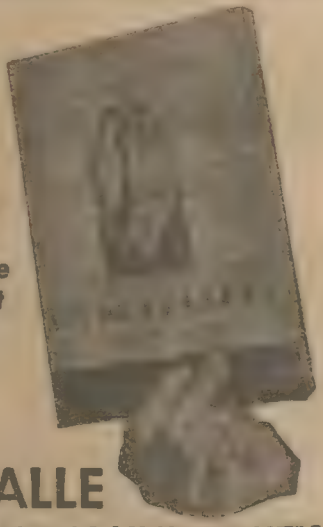

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to death about that long-eared sot of a son of his. His talkin' ain't helped Jed none at all! He and Jed was at the Double Rafter last night, and Jed was drunk. He went out after a drink, and while he was gone somebody shot Step-and-a-half from the darkened hall doorway. He can't swear who it was, but he's frettin' hisself into the grave for fear they're gonna hang that black-leg son of his for shootin' 'im!"

"Tell him to quit worrying," Sam Lee said flatly. "Jed didn't fire them bushwhack shots."

The doctor's gaze was stolid. "The sheriff has different opinions," he retorted. "They're holding a kind of preliminary hearing at his office right now. The final outcome'll depend on whether Slaughter lives or not, of course. If he does, Jed will get off light—say with a sentence of about ten years."

"And that Johnny-come-lately heir, Anthony, will take over the Double Rafter," Sam Lee flung over his shoulder, striding to the gate. "Just tell old Step-and-a-half that his oldest son ain't going to give him any more trouble!"

The sheriff's office was in the old adobe courthouse in the town plaza. Sam and Donna found the single dusty street lined with saddle horses wearing the brands of cow-outfits from Boquillas, Mexico, to Cow Heaven Mountain. A motley array of rigs, buckboards and wagons attested to the speed with which bad news traveled over the range, and the plaza was jammed with people.

Seeing them, Sam Lee cursed under his breath. "We've got to get inside that building, Donna," he blurted. "Ride in as close as you can, then swing down and pray that nobody tries to stop us!"

The big Double Rafter ramrod was in an ugly mood, and his steel-gray eyes mirrored fever and pain. The long ride had sapped him to the limit, but he sat poker-straight in the saddle. They rode into the edge of the crowd and swung down. Sam Lee had a dog-eared black leather Bible in one hand. He kept his other hand on the butt of his six-shooter.

Sam was well-known to a lot of ranchers and cowpunchers in that section of the brush country, and from the corners of his slitted eyes he saw men turn and gape in

astonishment as he and Donna shoved through the crowd. It was obvious that the news of his outlawry had gotten around. Someone yelled, "There goes Sam Lee!" and a lanky, hard-eyed deputy lounging on the courthouse steps came to instant attention.

In the split second while the deputy's eyes swept the crowd, hunting him out, Sam ducked and lunged past Donna Brady. He ripped his sixgun out of its greased scabbard and brought it up in a tight arc that ended with the muzzle shoved in the deputy's belly. The man grunted under the impact, then froze as the ominous click of the hammer sounded in his ears.

"Back!" Sam ordered thinly, and forced the startled lawman to march backward through the door. Inside, he caught the deputy by the shoulder and spun him around, lifting the man's sixgun. Then he prodded him along to a door at the rear of the gloomy corridor marked, *Sheriff & Tax Collector.*

Shoving the deputy ahead of him, Sam stepped inside and flattened against the wall, covering the men in the office with two snub-nosed .45's held in rock-steady hands. In the sudden electric silence the big ramrod's voice rasped like a rusty file.

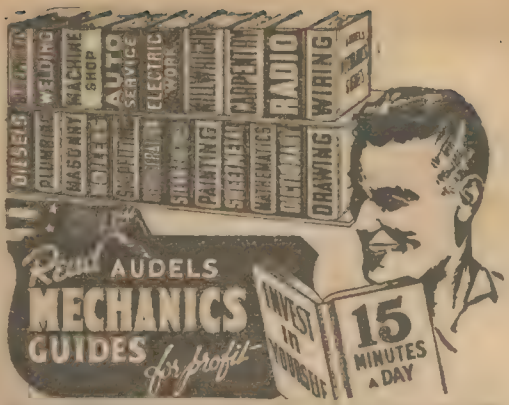
"I ain't taking much of your time, gents. I just stepped in here to see that a couple of double-dealin' polecats don't run a sandy on the law!"

* * *

THERE WERE seven men in the room, counting Sam Lee and the lean, flustered deputy. Donna Brady slipped into the office, and Sam hooked a long-shanked spur behind the door and slammed it shut. Then he stood on widespread legs, staring around the room.

The sheriff was a short, wiry, middle-aged cowman with a drooping tobacco-stained mustache and cold, direct eyes. His twin black shell-belts, with holstered guns, hung from a nail behind his chair. The lawman had his feet propped on the battered old rolltop desk, and he seemed the least surprised of all at Sam's unexpected appearance.

Jed Slaughter was manacled to a burly deputy, and both men sat on a pine bench



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against the south wall. Jed had a dirty blood-soaked bandage around his head and his dark hair was matted with dried blood. His red-rimmed black eyes were full of smouldering rage.

"Long time no see, Sam," he grinned twistedly. "Looks like a regular bounty-hunter's fiesta for the sheriff."

On the opposite side of the room, facing Jed and the deputy, sat the outlaw, Blackie Leonard, and the man who had hired Sam, Lawyer Ab Bishop. The latter was a tall, heavy man with bluish jowls that never seemed scraped quite clean by the razor. He wore a new store-bought coat and doeskin trousers with the legs stuffed into the tops of alligator-hide boots. A pair of thick-lensed rimless glasses dangled from his lapel by a long black ribbon, and he twirled them idly as he stared back at Sam Lee.

"Sheriff," he said, turning, "there's a warrant out for this man's arrest."

"The gent in question seems to have the floor," the lawman countered, with dry humor. "I reckon we better hear what he has to say, Bishop."

Blackie Leonard was grinning thinly, his opaque black eyes burning like coals of wicked fire in his suddenly tense face. He leaned a little forward, making no move to draw the staghorn-handled gun in the clip holster at his hip.

"Sheriff," Sam Lee said, "Ab Bishop and the coyote alongside him, an outlaw by the name of Blackie Leonard, are the men who shot down old Step-and-a-half Slaughter and are trying to railroad his son to the pen. They're framin' up to steal the Double Rafter ranch, and I can sure as hell prove it, pronto!"

The lawyer laughed contemptuously, but Blackie Leonard's eyes had taken on the glitter of a coiled rattler's.

"The records are open for your inspection, Sheriff," Bishop said coldly. "I've just received a wire from the marshal in Hartford, Ohio, collaborating Anthony Slaughter's story in full."

"And that's just where you slipped up, lawyer!" Sam flung at him savagely. "Old Step-and-a-half wanted to name his oldest son Anthony, and had it entered like that in the court records. But Myrna Slaughter, the boy's mother, wanted to use her family name. It was Lee. She persuaded Step-and-

a-half to change the boy's name, and it was entered that way in the old family Bible.

"Donna, take this Bible up to the sheriff and show him!"

The girl took the dog-eared book from under Sam's arm and carried it to the lawman. Ab Bishop swallowed hard, his face suddenly beaded with sweat.

"It says here," the sheriff began, adjusting his iron-rimmed spectacles and peering closely at the flyleaf, "that the Slaughter young-'un born first was named Sammie Lee Slaughter, and the date of entry is October 16, 1867!"

The lawman laid aside the Bible, adding, "I reckon it goes without question that you're that young-'un?"

Sam Lee nodded. A tight, nerve-shattering silence fell in the room, and Ab Bishop's expelled breath rasped audibly. Sam was watching Blackie Leonard, confident the big Border-jumper would be the first to break and go for his gun.

But it was Ab Bishop, the crooked lawyer, who kicked back his chair and snaked a hand under his loose coat. That hand came clear with a blazing sixgun, and the bullet slammed into the wall by Sam's head, showering him with 'dobe dust. He moved his right gun a fraction of an inch, placing a shot in the very core of that mushrooming powdersmoke.

Sam heard the lawyer grunt, saw him fold in the middle with his bulging eyes turning blood-red with pain. Then Blackie Leonard's gun roared and the blast seemed to catch Sam up and slam him against the wall. He realized, dimly, that he was hit. His hands were suddenly weak and the weight of the guns dragged them down. Through the eddying gunsmoke, he saw the spitting flare of the outlaw's gun as Blackie fired again.

The bulelt ripped into Sam's side and plouged along his ribs, and his own shot was purely reflex. He knew he had scored when the gun kicked back against the heel of his hand, and he let it drop, hanging onto the wall to keep from falling. He saw the outlaw, a bluish hole high in his forehead, topple through the smoke and crash heavily to the floor.

* * *

It seemed like hours later when he woke

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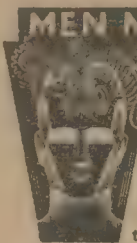

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to the touch of a cool hand on his burning brow, and heard a dry voice say, "That's right, Donna. Sam will live. The Slaughters are a breed that don't kill easy, even if you weigh 'em down with enough lead to sink a throw-rope!"

Sam opened his eyes and saw old Doc Cole and Jed Slaughter at the foot of the bed. He couldn't see Donna, but he knew she was beside him.

"Told you so, Jed," he mumbled. "Tougher'n a boot!"

Jed's grin was a little shaky. "Dad sent his regards. He 'lowed the Slaughters on his side of the family were a wild, ornery bunch. You take after the Lees. I take after Step-and-a-half's kin. But we're all of the same family, and we're gonna stick together from now on! That is, if you want it that way, Sam?"

"Sure I do!" Sam cried huskily, gripping his brother's hand. "Didn't realize how much the family name meant to me until I thought you was dealin' with Border thieves. Finding out you wasn't sure knocked some sense in my head!"

Later, Donna said, "You were going to ride out and not even tell them who you were, Sam."

He nodded. "Crazy pride will do funny things to a feller. It took me twenty years to find out Mother loved Dad, wild ways and all! Then I figured it was too late."

"Step-and-a-half quit his wild ways quick when he saw how his son was growing up," Donna said, pillowing her head on his good arm. "Jed has too. But, Sam—"

"Yes, honey?"

"*Mm-mm-mm.* What I started to say was, you're my kind of a man!"

Sam Lee closed his eyes and went back to sleep, a thankful smile on his bearded lips. There were no shadows on the trail now, no lonely nights hunkered beside a one-man campfire.

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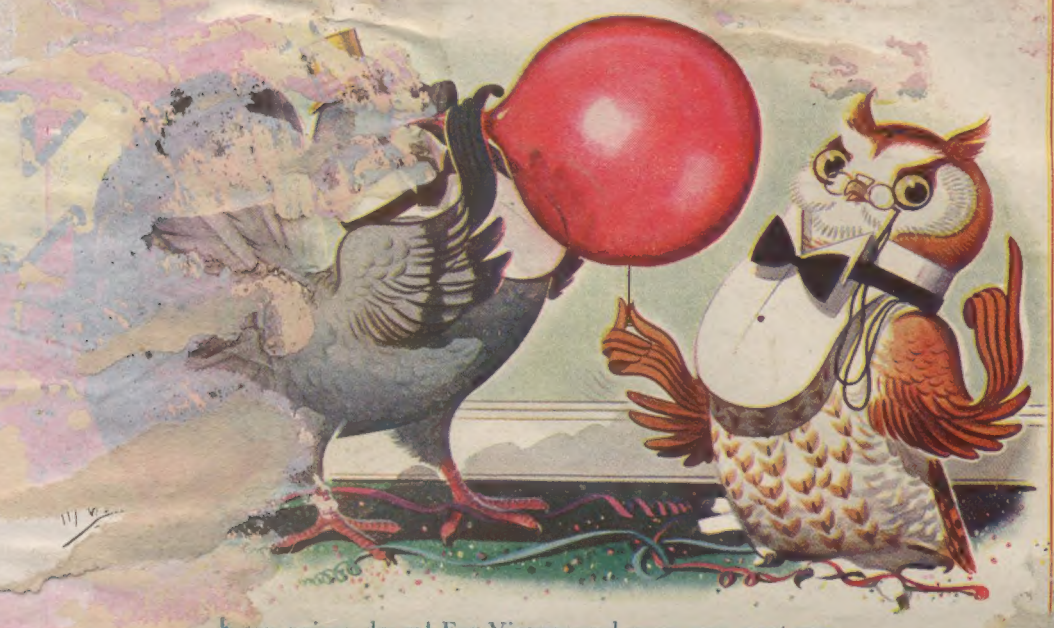

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